

# **The Noble Sanctuary: Interpreting Islamic Traditions of Asylum in the Contemporary World**

**TAHIR ZAMAN**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims at deepening understanding of religion in the social and cultural lives of forced migrants. It considers how Iraqi refugees in Damascus mobilise religious traditions, networks and institutions in order to negotiate their new surroundings and access much needed social and material resources. In doing so, refugees move beyond the management and care of UN agencies, international NGOs and the state. This thesis argues against conceptualizing religion solely as an identity concern or in institutional terms. Instead it emphasises religion as being a holistic and experiential matter.

This study provides a synchronic and diachronic examination of Islamic traditions in relation to sanctuary, refuge and the stranger. Over the course of a year, from March 2010 to March 2011, 23 Iraqi refugees and five refugee service providers participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Ethnographic data was also collected and recorded in the field during this time.

The thesis explores how Islamic traditions are interpreted in contemporary contexts in addition to demonstrating the relational dimensions of religious practice and experience. The constraints and opportunities Iraqi refugees encounter in em-placing themselves indicate that religion is a much contested notion. I make the case for a holistic understanding of religious practice and experience wherein home-making is a key concern. The challenges of facing a protracted exile and a protection impasse in Syria means Iraqi refugees are compelled to reflect upon their specific experiences of religion and to mobilize their understandings of religious traditions in innovative ways in order to construct inhabitable worlds.

It is argued that the complex intersection at which refugees are located in social space indicates that the struggle to make homes is contingent on relations of power. This study considers the positions refugees take relative to the state, international humanitarian agencies and faith-based actors in the humanitarian field. In doing so, attention is drawn to the agency of refugees as they struggle to negotiate circumstances of considerable constraint. This thesis also illustrates the challenges of conducting research in an authoritarian state.

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## **A note on language**

Arabic words in this thesis are transliterated based on a simplified version of the *International Journal of the Middle East* (IJMES) system. All translations in this thesis are my own. To preserve the Levantine and Iraqi dialects I replaced the phoneme /a/ with /eh/. I employ recognised English spelling for proper nouns and lexical terms that are commonly used in the English language.



## Glossary

‘ābir al sabīl	early Islamic term to refer to migrants. Literally the traverser of the path
‘ashīra (‘asha’ir)	clan(s)
abaya	loose outer garment worn by women
ahl al-bayt	the Prophet’s household
ajnabi	foreigner
akhlāq	ethical behaviour
aqīda	creed
awqāf	religious endowments
dahira	religious circle; a gathering
dīn	religion
dishdasha	a long, usually white collarless shirt which reaches above the ankles and is worn by men from the Gulf countries
ḡayūf	guests
dhikr	a devotional act associated with Sufi religious practices which requires the repetition of the Names of God or verses from the Qur’an. Literally it means remembrance.
dhilla	humiliation
‘Eid al-Adha	feast to celebrate the end of the Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah
gharīb	stranger
ghurba	alienation
Ginza Rabba	Mandaean sacred text
hijra	emigration; also refers to the migration of the Prophet Muhammad to Yathrib
ḥadīth	narrations of the life of the Prophet and the things approved by him
ḥalal	permissible
ḥamla al-īmāniyeh	faith campaign

ḥaram	forbidden
ḥawza	religious seminary
ḥawazat	plural of ḥawza
ḥusayniyeh	Shi'i Islamic centre where devotions in addition to obligatory prayers are offered
ḥizbi	belonging to the Ba'th party
ḥurma	sanctity; sacredness
iltimazat dīniyeh	religious commitment
iftar	the meal at the breaking of the fast during Ramadhan
iḥram	clothing worn by male pilgrims to Makkah.
īmān	faith; belief
'izza	prestige; honour
jaḥiliya	literally ignorance; used to refer to the time before the advent of Islam in the Arabian peninsula
jaysh al-sha'bi	popular [territorial] army
jiwār	pre-Islamic tradition of neighbourly protection
kāfir	disbeliever
kufār	plural of kāfir
khulufa'a al-rāshidīn	the righteously guided Caliphs
khums	One-fifth of income given as charitable donations in the Shi'i tradition.
laṭm	ritual lamentation
madhhab	school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence
ma'ida al-raḥmān	literally the tables of the Merciful: where food is given to those {usually the poor} who fast during Ramadhan
makātib al-wukalā	offices of the representatives of Shi'i jurists.
marja'iye al-taqlīd	source of emulation for the lay person in the Shi'i tradition

mu'akhat	brotherhood
mujtahid	Muslim jurist able to interpret Islamic law through independent reasoning
murtazaqa	mercenaries
mutazammit	strict
nakba	literally the catastrophe in reference to the mass displacement of Palestinians from their ancestral homelands following the creation of Israel.
pīr	Sufi religious leader in Kashmir
qiyām al-layl	literally standing of the night in reference to superogatory prayer said in the final third of the night by Muslims.
ruḥāniyeh	spirituality
sadaqa	Charitable donations: the recipients of <i>sadaqa</i> are less-narrowly defined as compared to the recipients of <i>zakāt</i> . Moreover it is not an obligation as <i>zakāt</i> is.
saddamiyīn	supporters of Saddam Hussein
servīs	privately-owned minibuses operating in Syria
shahāda	declaration of faith; one of the five pillars of Islam which are mandatory upon Muslims
shrūg	perjorative term used to describe disenfranchised urban poor in Baghdad
ta'ifiyeh	sectarianism
tawṭīn	re-settlement to a third country
ummah	community of Muslims
'ulamā	religious scholars
waṭan	nation; homeland
wāsta	brokerage connections
zakāt	obligatory alms based on 2.5% of an individual wealth to be collected for redistribution and is considered one of the five pillars of Islam.

## **Introduction: Refuge, Migration and Religion.**

Umar ibn al-Khattab, reported that the Messenger of Allah said: *“The reward of deeds depends upon the intentions and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended. Whoever's emigration is for Allah and His Messenger then his emigration is for Allah and His Messenger. Whoever's emigration is for some worldly gain which he can acquire or a woman he will marry then his emigration is for that for which he emigrated.”*<sup>1</sup>

This study is about the making and maintenance of relationships. It is about the decision-making and strategies of people acting under extremely constrained circumstances. It explores the ways in which forced migrants take up positions in relation to other influential actors including the state, international humanitarian agencies and NGOs. It is also an attempt to understand some aspects of structure and agency in decision-making. I examine understandings of Islamic traditions of asylum, refuge and sanctuary by investigating the ways in which religious networks, institutions and traditions are utilised by Iraqi refugees in their bid to access much needed resources in Syria.

With traditional durable solutions to the Iraqi displacement crisis seemingly unavailable, the protracted nature of the crisis provides the context in which religion as a social and cultural resource emerges as integral to enabling Iraqi refugees to construct an inhabitable world. I shall argue that Iraqi refugees are prompted to reflect upon their specific experiences of religion and to mobilise their understandings of religious traditions in innovative and unforeseen ways. This allows Iraqi refugees to take positions which contest dominant narratives of the state, religious institutions and international humanitarian agencies.

In proposing that refugees are active social agents this thesis opens up possibilities to examine tensions which arise through the taking of positions by refugees and other actors in the humanitarian field. In particular, I seek to uncover how understandings of the “stranger” are contested between a specific socio-cultural tradition and a dominant, state-centred discourse on refugees

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<sup>1</sup> Sahīh Bukhārī Vol.1, Book 001, Number 001.

which casts the latter as “unwanted” (Marrus 2002). Over the course of this thesis I relate how these tensions are manifested in the narratives of Iraqi refugees. Testimonies from refugee participants allow me to better understand the significance of religion in the initiatives and strategies employed by forced migrants in their everyday lives. It is this focus on the “lived experience” of refugees that has led me to approach both migration and religion as holistic matters.

Many researchers present their project by setting out contextual matters separately from their findings. In this thesis I have adopted a more unconventional method. I have found it useful to mobilise certain testimonies to bring to light contextual circumstances. Migration and religion are whole life experiences. In order to bring across the holistic nature of both I have introduced testimony earlier and more widely throughout the thesis than is often the case. Participants’ testimonies provide key insights into conditions under which people’s agency is activated and allows us to better consider the circumstances within which people set out strategies and act upon them.

### **1. Refuge in the study of religion and migration**

In February 2007 I was listening to a lecture on a postgraduate course in refugee studies about the historical origins of the figure of the refugee. Classical understandings of asylum in Ancient Greece, Roman practices of exile and early medieval Judaeo-Christian ideas of sanctuary were all listed as important precursors to the modern category of refugee. There was then a leap forward to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century when King Charles II of England offered asylum to persecuted Calvinists from France. This was the moment, it was said, when the modern category of the refugee was born; shifting the power to grant refuge and sanctuary away from religious institutions and into the hands of secular authorities – namely the state (Marfleet 2011). Wondering what the contribution of Islamic traditions had been in the development of the category of the contemporary figure of the refugee, I raised an awkward hand in the air and asked the lecturer where Islamic tradition fitted into this chronology. Thankfully, the lecturer thought it a pertinent point and suggested that perhaps I ought to

investigate it further. Five years and many conversations later I believe I have added a modest contribution to that time-line.

In 2007 I took my first tentative steps in tackling the issue of religion in the lives of Muslim refugees. My MA thesis explored the role of community mosques as a site of inclusion for Somali refugees living in London. Later that year, while working as an intern for London Citizens (a community organising project), I was introduced to the significance of faith-based organisations (FBOs) in the strategy-making of undocumented migrants in London and to the history of the contemporary sanctuary movement.<sup>2</sup> In both North America and Latin America there is a particularly rich recent history of the role of FBOs in facilitating the strategies of marginalised and vulnerable people (Bau 1985, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008, Rabben 2011), but there has been little work on such developments elsewhere.

The six months I spent working with London Citizens set into motion a train of thoughts regarding the movement of people and ideas into East London. The experiences and conversations I had with many different people across all faiths and none alerted me to how closely linked migration and religion can be. The idea of community organising was one which migrated from the United States with the now Executive Director of London Citizens, Neil Jameson, who had been exposed to the work of Saul Alinsky, the founder of the influential Industrial Areas Foundation community organising project in Chicago. Membership of the East London branch of London Citizens (TELCO) reflects both the diversity of East London boroughs and the significance of sacred spaces in the lives of first, second and third generation migrants to East London. My time with London Citizens also made me consider how avenues of participation can be facilitated by FBOs - bridging relationships between diverse populations which may otherwise not have had the space to do so.

Before venturing on an academic journey into the field of Refugee Studies, I had had the good fortune to live in Cairo for two years. During this time, I had been able to see at first-hand the salience of religious networks in the lives of

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on London citizens and their work relating to undocumented migrants see: [http://www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk/?page\\_id=23](http://www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk/?page_id=23) [Accessed on August 10 2012].

Eritrean, Somali and Sudanese refugees. Much like the FBOs active in London, church organisations and international NGOs were actively involved in providing a network of support to refugees arriving in Cairo. Churches such as All Saints Cathedral in the Zamalek district of Cairo (originally built with European expatriates in mind) and the Sakakini Church of the Sacred Heart in Abbasiyya have now become important hubs for refugee congregations. For many refugees coming from or via Sudan, the Church of the Sacred Heart is where they alight in Cairo.<sup>3</sup> In 2005, resettlement opportunities to the Global North were available. Large numbers of refugees finding themselves at the gates of the Church of the Sacred Heart found temporary emergency lodgings in classrooms of schools run by the Church. Networks of information were mobilised to relay information back and forth between Cairo and towns and cities in Sudan.<sup>4</sup> Over time, the church became a key link in the migration networks linking Cairo to the Horn of Africa.

In 2005 the Muslim Brotherhood was still a banned political organisation but religion seemed highly visible in the public sphere. Charismatic preachers filled Egyptian airwaves, companies branding “Islamic” products seemed aplenty and people’s conversations were increasingly punctuated by Islamic phrases. Yet, in the many conversations I had at the time with both Egyptians and refugees I was struck by the lack of involvement on the part of Islamic networks and institutions. What could explain this reluctance to engage with refugee communities? Egyptians I knew suggested that they had problems enough of their own living under the constraints of a neo-liberal agenda set by the state. Refugees, after all, had the possibility to leave Egypt for greener pastures through re-settlement programmes. People from the South of Sudan simply attributed it to racism. It was with these ideas and experiences in mind that I turned my attention to the unfolding crisis in Iraq and Syria.

Nothing had quite prepared me for the extent to which the pervasive reach of a security agenda governed the lives of ordinary people and institutions in Syria. Although I had read accounts of life in Syria, a large body of the literature

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<sup>3</sup> Discussion with Catholic Relief Services Team in Cairo, 11 December 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Discussion with Father Jamil of the Church of the Sacred Heart, Cairo, 12 December 2011.

tended to focus on the perspective of the state (Seale 1988, Hennesbusch 2001, Perthes 2004) and only very recently had there been growing attention paid to the struggle to open up political space on studies concerning Syria (Wedeen 1999, Ismail 2009, Pierret 2009). I arrived in Syria with expectations of my own, naively hoping to find FBOs working diligently and openly to meet the needs of refugee populations as is the case in London and Cairo. However, as I mentioned at the outset of this introductory chapter, this study is about the decision-making and strategies of people acting under extremely constrained circumstances. This includes not only the refugees and the service providers who participated in this project but the researcher also. The fact that security concerns are uppermost in the state's relations to its citizenry meant that my participants' relationships with me were always affected by the omnipresent shadow of the state. For the large part this remained something unsaid between my participants and I. Although implicit, this does not negate its significance. In light of this, the issue of positionality and reflexivity on the part of the researcher is a recurrent issue throughout the thesis.

## **2. Finding gaps in the literature**

There are significant gaps in the literature concerning the role of religion in refugee communities. This omission indicates perhaps that religion and faith is considered by many researchers to be less important than issues of class, race, ethnicity or gender. I contend otherwise - and propose that religion is linked in complex ways to all of the above. For this reason, as recommended by Stephen Castles (2003:29), a holistic approach to migration and religion is necessary to locate the intersections at which religion is situated.

Surveying the literature, it quickly became clear that much of the discussion of social capital and FBOs was written in the context of the Global North (Nannestad 2005, Korac 2005, Furbey et.al 2006, Furbey 2007, Cheong et.al 2007). Similarly, the few studies which examined the relationship between forced migration and religion did so once again in the context of refugees living in more industrialised countries (Gozdziak 2002, McMichael 2002, Colic-Peisker 2005, Shoeb et.al 2007).



Moreover, discussion on religious traditions was either concerned with the perspective of service providers (Nawyn 2005, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008) or consisted of text based analyses of Islamic traditions (Arnaout 1987, ElMadmad 1991, Muzaffar 2001, Yakoob & Mir 2005, Zaat 2007, Manuty 2008, Shoukri 2011). Didem Daniş (2007) and her work on Iraqi Christian women working as domestic servants in Istanbul provides us with one of very few studies which explores the role of religious networks and institutions in the lives of refugee populations in a country not belonging to the Global North. Following Daniş, I also focus on another “transit” country for Iraqi refugees: Syria. However, unlike other researchers who have investigated the intersection of religion and migration, I broaden my understanding of capital to include not only social capital but cultural capital. I add to the literature on ideas about social and cultural capital as they apply to displaced people by means of analysing the extent to which Iraqi refugees, as active social agents, are able to mobilise “religious resources” to better negotiate their experience of exile. My research addresses these gaps in the literature and sets out to answer the following questions:

- What are the difficulties that often prevent Iraqi refugees from securing access to material and social resources in Syria?
- To what extent do mosques and other Muslim religious institutions and networks constitute a site of inclusion and opportunity for Iraqi refugees in a society under intense economic and societal pressures?
- Do tensions exist at the interface between Iraqi refugees and religious networks and institutions?
- How is the experience of displacement reflected in the sacred space and religious experiences and/or practices of Iraqi refugees?
- In what ways have the expectations and religious experiences and/or practices of Iraqi forced migrants been modified by the experience of displacement?

### **3. Thesis outline**

As noted above, there is a growing body of work which pays attention to text based Islamic traditions - most notably from the Qur'an and *aḥadīth* literature.

This thesis is concerned primarily with the experience of “lived religion” but one cannot be understood without the other. Although traditions are mentioned in passing in the narratives of my participants, I have found it useful to preface each chapter of this thesis with an epigram taken from the Qur’an or *aḥadīth* literature. This provides a sense of how Islamic traditions understand issues of asylum, assistance and protection. The translation of *aḥadīth* and the Qur’an which I use in this thesis can be found on the website for the Centre for Muslim-Jewish Engagement, an excellent resource which grew out of a project initiated by the University of Southern California.<sup>5</sup>

The thesis can be divided into three distinct parts. In Chapters One and Two I position myself in the research project and in contemporary debates in the fields of migration studies, refugee studies and the sociology of religion. Chapters Three and Four utilise testimony from participants to provide the context to the displacement of Iraqi refugees and consider triggers for displacement. Chapter Five and Six also mobilise data gathered from the field in Damascus to consider the situation of Iraqi refugees on arrival in Syria.

In Chapter One I discuss the much contested notion of religion. I explore the contribution of Thomas Tweed (2006) in understanding “dwelling” and “crossing” as metaphors for religious practice and belief. I also address Pierre Bourdieu’s (1962, 1979, 1986, 1990a, 1991, 1994, 2000) notions of habitus, field, capital and practice, which are invaluable in accounting for the power relations that permeate social spaces within which Iraqi refugees are located. Employing a Bourdieuan framework allows me to consider Islamic traditions as a part of the cultural capital that Iraqi refugees possess and are able to employ to navigate their new surroundings. A Bourdieuan framework also draws attention to the relational structure of social space which I propose is integral to understandings of “lived religion”.

In Chapter Two I elaborate on methodological concerns associated with this thesis. I explain how the theoretical framework outlined in the preceding chapter is put to use. I also take the opportunity to locate myself within the research

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<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.cmje.org/> for access to Qur’anic and *aḥadīth* literature

project. A primary concern of this chapter is to recognize what Bourdieu (1999) calls the “analyst’s intrusion” in the research project. I therefore expound upon the ethics involved in data gathering in the context of conducting research in Syria in relation to my status as a researcher. I offer a discussion on the dilemmas surrounding transcription and translation of participants’ testimonies in addition to outlining some of the difficulties of conducting research on a politically sensitive issue under the watchful eye of an authoritarian state.

Chapters Three and Four interweave testimonies from participants with a contextual overview of the events and debates which prompted the forced displacement of Iraqis. This approach has the advantage of allowing me to chart the ways in which a religious disposition or habitus is structured over time. It reveals changing attitudes towards religious actors and institutions. As such, the use of testimony in these chapters can be considered as a means to map the religious field in Iraq by mobilising the memories of participants. It also highlights the necessity to consider religion holistically. Chapter Three examines the period from the Iran-Iraq war until the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Chapter Four provides a more immediate context to the Iraqi refugee crisis. This chapter explores the period immediately after the invasion and the ensuing occupation. It considers the impact of the sectarian aftermath on Iraqi attitudes towards religious actors and institutions.

Chapters Five and Six bring us to the site of my fieldwork: Damascus. Chapter Five maps the humanitarian field in Syria. This chapter presents a nuanced examination of the role of religious networks and institutions in the strategies of forced migrants in urban contexts. It considers how FBOs, in relation to the state and the UNHCR, work to integrate displaced populations into their new surroundings. I examine how Iraqi refugees, as active social agents, utilise religious networks and institutions in conjunction with established international humanitarian organisations to produce a distinctive geography of exile. I also draw attention to how the Syrian state exerts influence over religious actors and how this affects the decision making of forced migrants. I contend that partnerships formed between the state, UNHCR and international NGOs result in a “protection impasse” for Iraqi refugees in Damascus.

The final chapter continues with a spatial analysis of religion in the lives of Iraqi refugees in Damascus. This chapter brings together key insights from the theoretical chapter to cast additional light on the relational and inter-subjective aspects of home-making which are central to the process of emplacement. I consider the extent to which Syria can be conceptualised as a familiar space for Iraqi forced migrants, wherein cultural practices including religious practices are sustained and realized through social and kin networks – and also mediated through a new urban setting with its attendant relations to the state. I also propose that communal “home-like spaces” are produced and inhabited by Iraqi forced migrants as a means to aggregate and add to existing non-material forms of capital to access more material resources. Finally, I explore how the familial home continues to function as a sacred space for Iraqi refugees. I suggest that all three modes of home noted here: domestic dwellings, community organisations and the city constitute key spaces inscribed with religious significance which help to orient Iraqi forced migrants in the wake of displacement.

## Chapter One

### The Noble Sanctuary

*“If one among those, who associate partners with God, asks you for protection and assistance, grant it to him, so that he may hear the Word of God, and then escort him to where he can be secure. That is because they are men without knowledge.”*<sup>6</sup>

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I propose that a more nuanced understanding of religion is required than that which the sociology of religion has traditionally provided.<sup>7</sup> In particular, we must consider knowledge of Islamic traditions and practices in the Middle East in a sustained dialectic with the experiences of resident populations – in this case, forcibly displaced Iraqis. To do so, I engage with the work of Tweed (2006), drawing on his “trans-temporal” and “trans-locative” insights into religious experience and practice, which call upon metaphors of crossing and dwelling. This enables me to offer an analysis of the dynamics of religion in the transnational space that many refugees occupy today.

In addition, this chapter explores Islamic traditions pertaining to matters of hospitality, assistance, asylum and sanctuary to the stranger. By locating our inquiry into the significance of Islamic representations of asylum and protection, and the initiatives employed by forced migrants in their everyday lives, we may conceptualise a “bottom-up” approach which seriously considers the expectations and entitlements of refugee populations. Such an approach begins with the agency of forced migrants themselves as opposed to the state-centric model that is at the heart of the modern international protection regime.

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<sup>6</sup> The Noble Qur'an 9:6

<sup>7</sup> There is a vast range of approaches and arguments within the sociology of religion; with the emergence of modern science, religion could no longer be held to be an objective truth- its enduring appeal had to be explained without recourse to the supernatural language of religion itself (Pals, 2006). Marx, Durkheim and Freud represent a body of thinkers who understand religion as an expression of something altogether different; religion is seen as something functional whose origins can be traced to an underlying need or circumstance. Though the reductionist aspects of each of these thinkers have been thoroughly critiqued, they have remained hugely influential in the work of later sociologists of religion.

It is my contention that Iraqi forced migrants are able to mobilise non-material “religious resources” to help gain access to material resources by positioning themselves in relation to existing religious institutions and networks. The extraordinary circumstances in which Iraqi forced migrants find themselves encourage a re-imagining or re-energising of particular understandings of religious traditions. With this in mind, I critically examine the utility of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice to better understand the role of religious traditions, networks and institutions in relation to the practices and decision-making of Iraqi refugees. I suggest that rather than merely consuming religious resources, social agents challenge the passivity assigned to them in the religious field by Bourdieu and in fact engage in the production or re-assembling of religious resources, competing against institutions which are regarded by Bourdieu as the dominant producers of religious resources. I examine the social space that Iraqi refugees occupy and suggest that this extends beyond ideas of a nation-state and has a specifically Islamic transnational dimension.

### **1.1. Transnational Islam**

Writing in 2003, Stephen Castles suggested researchers ought to work towards a sociology of forced migration within a broader conceptual framework of global social transformations. Drawing on the work of Wimmer & Glick-Schiller (2002), he argues that much research on matters pertaining to migration is bounded by methodological nationalism (Castles 2003). This views the nation-state as a “container” (Faist 2000) which acts as the unit of analysis for social life in all its intricacy and complexity. What is required, he argues, is a commitment on the part of researchers to contextualise the migratory process under consideration; taking into account the socio-economic, political and cultural linkages that are at play at a specific point in time (Castles 2003:14). In addition, we must recognize a transnational social space which has emerged as technological advances in transport and communication have allowed inter-connectedness between individuals, networks and organisations to be maintained across borders (Faist 2000). Let us now consider how we can navigate our analysis beyond methodological nationalism and contemplate the ways in which religion (in this

case Islam) provides migrants with a transnational dimension and alternative understandings of belonging.

Faist (2000:195) identifies three distinct forms of transnational space: kinship groups, circuits and communities, and Grillo (2004) suggests that transnational Islam can be found in various contexts including a bi-national framework, migratory circuits, and the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) of Muslims, the *ummah*.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Bowen (2004) maintains that too much emphasis has been placed on the migratory aspect of transnational Islam and networks of religious organisations while neglecting how transnational Islam acts as a "transmission belt" (Faist 2000) for ideas; establishing and legitimating a normative discourse. This view is endorsed by Hannerz (1996) who reminds us that not only has the mobility of people multiplied exponentially over recent years, but there has also been an increased circulation of cultural practices and of the symbols and meanings that are attached to them.

Research on Sufi variants of Islam and in particular on transnational religious networks has received considerable attention. Werbner (2002) demonstrates enduring links between devotees of charismatic *pīrs* (Sufi religious leaders) in Britain and cult centres in Pakistan and Kashmir. Disciples arrange for visits of the *pīr* from Pakistan and Kashmir for weeks if not months at a time, attending the homes of devotees and local mosques whose congregations hail from Pakistan and Kashmir. Such public acts of hospitality are further supplemented by fund-raising to support charitable activities of the *pīr* in their homeland. Similarly, Senegalese adherents to the Mouride brotherhood engage in migration to and from various European countries (predominantly Italy and France), building a transnational network "anchored" (Riccio 2004) in Senegal. *Dahiras* (religious circles) facilitate the reception of newcomers in the country of emigration and also bolster trade networks and commercial links between adherents. The relationship between disciples and the spiritual home of the brotherhood, the city of Touba, allows cultural resources to flow to urban centres in Europe while material resources flow in the opposite direction,

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<sup>8</sup> In Chapter Six, I consider the possibility that the *ummah* is more than merely an "imagined community" but is actually realized through the nurturing of relationships which help contribute to the process of home-making.

transforming Toubā into a major commercial and spiritual hub in sub-Saharan Africa (Grillo 2004).

It would be wrong to draw direct parallels between the experiences of Pakistani migrants in Britain or Senegalese migrants in Italy with Iraqi refugees in Syria for the obvious reason that Iraqis have been forcibly displaced from their homeland. Nonetheless, the fact that many Iraqis have settled in the Damascus suburb of Sayyida Zayneb provides us with the opportunity to examine the role that religious networks and institutions play in the reception of large numbers of migrants. The district of Sayyida Zayneb takes its name from the shrine dedicated to the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad and is a key place of pilgrimage for Shi'i Muslims from across the world. It is also home to *al-makātib al-wukalā* (representative offices) of *mujtahids*<sup>9</sup> from Iraq, who are instrumental in the collection of the *khums* religious tax which is used in part by the *marja'iyya*<sup>10</sup> for the implementation of charitable projects. Sayyida Zayneb is also an integral part of the transport network that links Damascus to the major cities of Iraq and is the first port of call for many Iraqis arriving in Syria.

Transnational dimensions of Islam are also evident in the field of knowledge production and dissemination. Traditionally, the *Hajj* or annual pilgrimage to Makkah was the vehicle through which the *ummah* manifested itself. The same can be said for lesser pilgrimages to shrines such as that of Sayyida Zayneb. Today, advances in technology have meant that the *ummah* is connected in innovative ways (Nielsen 1999). We find that technology which was once railed against by the clerical establishment as being the hallmark of profanity has been embraced wholeheartedly by the very same clerical establishment. Economies of scale are now available through the medium of the internet, where *mujtahids* offer *fatwas* on everyday living and disseminate their opinions to a diverse and international audience. The mushrooming of satellite dishes on

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<sup>9</sup> An Islamic jurist able to interpret Islamic law through independent reasoning.

<sup>10</sup> A leading cleric may reach such heights of piety and knowledge that he may become the *marja'iyya al-taqlid* or the source of emulation for the layperson. Though there is a hierarchy with the *al-marja' al-az'am* or the grand *marja'* at the pinnacle it is possible for there to be a number of *marja'* operating at the same time without it constituting a schism in the faith. Followers or *muqallid* are free to attach themselves to a *marja'* of their choice. It is to the office of the *marja'* that religious taxes such as the *Khums* are given and often the opinion of the *marja'* is the final word on an issue (Walbridge 2001).



rooftops across the urban sprawl of cities such as Cairo, Amman and Damascus facilitates broadcasts of ideas and opinions of *mujtahids* directly into the living quarters of tens of millions of people. Mass migration and technological advances, far from “destroying the soil in which traditional religiosity [is] rooted” (Bourdieu 1979:70), today act as a key fertilising ingredient for the production and consumption of religious ideas and practices. The exponential growth and reach of satellite television and the internet has also meant that ideas are criss-crossing the Muslim world and beyond into Europe, Asia and North America.<sup>11</sup>

For Bowen (2004:880) transnational Islam, therefore, is not only contingent on the migration of people but also “implies the existence and legitimacy of a global public space of normative reference and debate”. The diffusion and dissemination of Islamic knowledge through modern mediums of mass communication means that adherents of the many different interpretations of Islam currently being practised have access to the opinions of the many different sources of religious authority available across the globe providing them with normative frames of reference.

Damascus, the site of my fieldwork, is a city which has been central to the circulation of ideas, people and cultural practices in the Near East for millennia. For much of the last 1400 years these exchanges have been heavily accented by Islam. In more recent history, the Syrian Arab Republic posits its territory and people to be an integral part of the broader Arab nation.<sup>12</sup> Dawn Chatty (2010:37) makes the point that for the nation-states carved out from the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire - unlike European nation-states - culture and understandings of national identity are *not* exclusively tied to territory. This she attributes to the experience of mass migrations, both forced and voluntary, over the past hundred years which has made widespread “the acceptance of mobility as normal rather than an aberration [...] the tradition of overlapping heritages

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<sup>11</sup> A cursory glance at Islamic websites such as [www.islamtoday.com](http://www.islamtoday.com) reveals that articles and discussions are available not only in Arabic and English but French and Chinese also.

<sup>12</sup> Article 1:2-3 of the Syrian Arab Republic’s constitution reads: ‘The Syrian Arab Republic is a part of the Arab homeland. The people in the Syrian Arab region are part of the Arab nation and work and struggle to achieve the Arab nation’s comprehensive unity.’ Available at: [http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html) . [Accessed on 5 July 2012].

and homelands, imagined and rooted, sometimes in the same spaces, has meant greater acceptance of the portability of culture and national identities, a kind of local cosmopolitanism” (ibid.). I contend that the “local cosmopolitanism” to which Chatty refers is made possible by a deeply embedded tradition of welcoming the other in Islamic teachings. Using examples from the Qur’an and *aḥadīth* literature, the following section explores understandings of “the other” which I believe continue to resonate in the cultural practices of the Middle East.

## **1.2. The ‘stranger’ in the Muslim imagination**

In Arabic, the word nation or homeland is often translated as *waṭan*. In the context of modern nation states the right to belong to a nation state is contingent on having been born in that country – *jus soli* (the law of soil) or on having a hereditary right – *jus sanguinis* (the law of blood). The Arabic term *waṭan* refers to any place which is inhabited (*maḥal al-insānī*), making no mention of either soil or blood. Pre-modern notions in the Muslim world of who is entitled to residency are contingent on the actual fact of residency – *jus domicili*. The vestiges of this open tradition towards migration, and indeed towards the stranger, continue to be inscribed in the cultural practices of people in the Middle East. A key objective of this thesis is to consider to what extent such a tradition exists in tension with the logic of the nation-state, a logic which reduces belonging to the nation – and therefore rights to citizenship – to nationality based on birthright.

Strict adherence to *jus sanguinis* laws, as is the case in the Syrian Arab Republic, means that for refugee communities such as Palestinians, statelessness is passed on to the children of stateless people (Gibney 2009:50). Such a legal position stands at odds with the Syrian Arab Republic's self-declared aims in its constitution.<sup>13</sup> The chief architect of many of these changes has been the modern nation-state, yet the question remains as to how people situated within such competing narratives reconcile these tensions and paradoxes.

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<sup>13</sup> Article 3.2 states: “Islamic jurisprudence is a main source of legislation.”

A further example of divergent readings of belonging offered by the state - in contrast to Islamic traditions - is that of the stranger or foreigner. In Islamic tradition two terms demand particular consideration: *gharīb* and *ajnabi*. Other phrases used in Islamic traditions to denote the stranger include the *ibn al-sabīl* (son of the path) and *'ābir al-sabīl* (traverser of the path). A *ḥadīth*<sup>14</sup> of the Prophet states: "Be in this world as if you were a stranger or an *'ābir al-sabīl*".<sup>15</sup> Here, we can see that the Prophet did not directly equate the stranger with the *'ābir al-sabīl*. Franz Rosenthal (1997:37), in his excellent essay on representations of the stranger in Medieval Islam, observes that the stranger is defined as "one who may take up residence in a foreign place" whereas an *'ābir al-sabīl* is "one who intends to go to a faraway place (because he is in a difficult situation and cannot stay in one place)". We can clearly see that both terms cover the process of displacement; the latter term is consistent with the early stages of flight and seeking asylum while the former can be equated with contemporary ideas about refugee status or an equivalent thereof. The *ḥadīth* also points to the metaphor of religion or a life well-lived in accordance with God's Laws as being a journey or a crossing. This is an idea that I return to later in this chapter.

Given the paucity of literature investigating and recording associations between Islamic traditions and refugees, it is unsurprising that very little has been written on how assistance can be given to forced migrants through Islamic welfare mechanisms. Muzaffar (2001:5) suggests that a framework for the assistance of forced migrants already exists in countries with a majority Muslim population in the form of *zakāt*<sup>16</sup>, *sadaqa*<sup>17</sup>, *awqaf*<sup>18</sup> and *khums*.<sup>19</sup> In his survey on modern

<sup>14</sup> *Ḥadīth* (singular) *ahadīth* (plural). *Ḥadīth* literature refers to the narrations of the life of the Prophet and his recommendations for a life well-lived. *Ahadīth* are collated either according to *masanid* (authority of the source) or *musannafit* (according to topics of jurisprudence). Al-Bukhārī and Muslim's works are considered authentic by Muslims. A cross referencing system arranges *ḥadīth* according to categories of credibility; for example, *sahīh* (authentic), *hasan* (good), *da'if* (weak), *gharīb* (strange). *Ahadīth* appearing in a *Sahīh* collection are considered more credible than those presented in a *Sunan* collection. Three groups of traditions are arranged according to their narration: namely, *mutawatir* (consecutive testimony), *mashhūr* (well known) and *ahadi* (single person narratives). The quality of each tradition is also weighted according to this categorization. See Mahmassani, S (1961: 72-74).

<sup>15</sup> Sahīh Bukhārī Vol. 8, Book 076, Number 425

<sup>16</sup> Obligatory alms based on 2.5% of an individual wealth to be collected for redistribution and is considered one of the five pillars of Islam which are mandatory upon Muslims.

<sup>17</sup> Often equivocated to alms-giving, the recipients of *sadaqa* are less-narrowly defined as compared to the recipients of *zakāt*. Moreover it is not an obligation as *zakāt* is.

state approaches to *zakāt*, Powell (2009) finds that of 40 predominantly Muslim countries, 24 have yet to institutionalize the payment of *zakāt*. This can be attributed to a history of colonialism in those countries where modern legal systems had been superimposed upon existing traditional legal systems creating hybrid legal regimes. Even so, in countries such as Turkey 69% of the population today make *zakāt* contributions despite there being no legislation compelling them to do so (Hassan 2007). However, it should be noted that in countries where the government does not enforce the payment of *zakāt* through legislation, the collection and redistribution process remains decentralised. The evidence points to a skewed redistribution of wealth in favour of those who have nurtured relationships with those who are charged with distributing the wealth and not necessarily to those in most need (Prihatna 2005).

The Qur'an provides a comprehensive list of those eligible for the receipt of *zakāt*:

“Alms are only for the poor and the needy, and the officials (appointed) over them, and those whose hearts are made to incline (to truth) and the (ransoming of) captives and those in debts and in the way of Allah and the wayfarer; an ordinance from Allah; and Allah is knowing, Wise.”<sup>20</sup>

Forced migrants are eligible to receive *zakāt* on the grounds that they (depending on individual circumstance) meet three of the criteria in the aforementioned verse. Forcibly displaced people are often excluded at the margins of society with little access to resources and are in some cases destitute. In addition, many are in a transitory state. Certainly in the case of Iraqi refugees in Syria, a considerable number of forced migrants have expressed both an unwillingness to remain in Syria or return to Iraq; preferring the option of moving to a third country for resettlement (UNHCR 2010a).

In Syria, the state does not collect *zakāt* from its citizens. However, this does not mean that Syrians do not pay *zakāt*, or *sadaqa* – only that it may be paid

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<sup>18</sup> Religious endowments.

<sup>19</sup> One-fifth of income from the spoils of war. Although under Shi'i jurisprudence, there is a more expansive meaning.

<sup>20</sup> The Noble Qur'an 9:60

through unofficial channels. The role of local non-governmental community based organisations becomes pivotal in redistributing wealth. In light of the exclusionary asylum policies pursued by many states today, some forced migrants awaiting their refugee status to be determined have been left destitute. Thus understanding of whether forced migrants can be included in the category of *ibn al-sabīl* could potentially have far-reaching consequences. Some political scientists have suggested, correctly in my opinion, that modern Muslim nation-states privilege strategic national and regional interests over and above any calls for meeting Islamic responsibilities towards the vulnerable in society (Roy, 1994). This leaves a vacuum in which faith-based organisations can position themselves, creating a political space around welfare provision in countries such as Syria where political participation is limited. This idea is explored further in Chapter five.

Returning to Islam in the pre-modern era, the term *gharīb* was often used less as a legal category than an all-embracing label for any individual who had left her original place of residence voluntarily or involuntarily: it was not contingent on the length of stay. It encompassed students, religious scholars, wandering ascetics, pilgrims, traders and forcibly displaced people. Clearly, it was an ambiguous and nebulous term. A survey of medieval literature from the Muslim world reveals that the state of being *gharīb* was also viewed with much ambivalence (Rosenthal 1997).

On the one hand, good treatment of strangers was a highly regarded custom of pre-Islamic Arabian culture such that those who demonstrated kindness and generosity to strangers were lauded with the title of *ma'wā al-gharīb* (refuge of the stranger) (Rosenthal 1997:68). This attitude towards strangers was further institutionalised by Qur'anic and Prophetic injunctions which encouraged generosity and good conduct towards strangers. In particular, the institutionalisation of the pre-Islamic tribal practice of *jiwār* – the granting of protection and assistance to the one seeking refuge illustrates the central importance of hospitality towards the stranger (Shoukri 2010:3).<sup>21</sup> One *ḥadīth*

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<sup>21</sup> The early history of Islam is littered with examples of *jiwār*. From being the ones who requested the *jiwār* of the non-Muslims of Makkah as was the case of the first khalīf Abu Bakr when he accepted

attributed to the Prophet states: "Islam began as a stranger, and it will revert to its (old position) of being strange. Therefore, blessed are the strangers".<sup>22</sup> While the exact meaning of this *ḥadīth* is open to interpretation, it unequivocally celebrates the stranger - encouraging good treatment towards the other as a key concern of Islam.

On the other hand, negative dimensions of leaving one's original place of residence were frequently expressed in *adab* literature.<sup>23</sup> Most notably was the recognition that leaving one's ancestral lands was accompanied by a diminution of social and material resources. Rosenthal notes that the binary of *dhilla* (humiliation) and *ʿizz* (prestige or honour) were most commonly employed by poets in the Abbasid court to reflect on the experience of being in a strange land. He writes:

[Prestige] tends to vanish whenever home, family, and the friends among whom one has grown up are abandoned and have become nothing but a fond memory. The familiarity with them that had provided protection and comfort becomes desolation, the depressing feeling of being alone and having nobody to turn to. It complements the poverty that was seen as something that strangers as a rule were unable to overcome (Rosenthal 1997: 42).

The linkage of *ʿizz* and *dhilla* to alienation or distance from home by Arab court poets of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries (C.E) points to the central importance of the relational home<sup>24</sup> in understanding religious practice and belief.<sup>25</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup>

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the protection of Ibn al-Dighna to the case of requesting mass-*jiwār* from Abyssinia. A further example is that of the *hijra* (emigration) of the early community of Muslims – including the Prophet Muhammad – to al-Yathrib (modern-day Medina) where they were granted *jiwār*. Later, Muslims went from requesting protection to granting it. *Jiwār* could be granted by any citizen of the new Islamic state and was for Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Shoukri 2010:17-43). Moreover, the practice of *jiwār* was also explicitly endorsed in the Qur'an (9:6).

<sup>22</sup> Saḥīḥ Muslim Book 001, Number 270

<sup>23</sup> A literary genre which celebrated norms and customs derived from pre-Islamic Arabia. It reached its zenith during the Abbasid caliphate and was strongly associated with erudition, urbanity and good manners.

<sup>24</sup> The relational home is a notion which has been developed by Helen Taylor (2009). She posits a four-fold framework for the notion of home: namely, spatial, material, temporal and relational revealing the notion of home to be one which is marked by complexity and contested meaning. She identifies human relationships as central to the relational home. I explore the contested notion of home in greater depth in Chapter Six.

Century poet 'Ali ibn al-Jahm at the court of the Abbasid Caliph al-Muttawakil captures the anguish of displacement and the struggle for emplacement that many Iraqi refugees in Damascus would find familiar:

Pity the stranger in a foreign country,  
what has he done to himself!  
He left his friends, and they had no use  
for life after he was gone, nor did he.  
He enjoyed great prestige when he lived near his domicile,  
but later, when he was far away, he was downcast.  
Being a stranger far away, he says:  
God is just in whatever He does (cited in Rosenthal 1997:46).

With the emergence of the nation-state, an alternative term came into popular usage; *ajnabi* (pl. *ajānib*) whose root j-n-b is used to mean to put to one side. A Qur'anic injunction<sup>26</sup> to demonstrate kindness to categories of persons includes among them *al-jār dhil-qurbā* (the related neighbour) and *al-jār al-junub* (the unrelated neighbour).<sup>27</sup> Al-Tabārī<sup>28</sup> in his exegesis of the Qur'an states that the unrelated neighbour is one who is not necessarily Muslim and the command in the Qur'an is directed towards the treatment of all neighbours. Thus, the traditional interpretation of the unrelated neighbour equates it with the *gharīb* or stranger (Rosenthal 1997:38-40).

However, modern Arab nation states adopt a more restricted reading of the term. The word *tajannub*, which shares the same root as *ajnabi*, means to avoid. Thus the stranger or foreigner is transformed into someone to be avoided. This can also perhaps be attributed in part to the encounter with colonialism and the confusion engendered through being made subordinate to a people who did not share the same world-view. Importantly, non-Syrian Arabs are classified officially as other Arabs rather than *ajānib*.

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<sup>25</sup> This is an argument that I develop more fully in Chapter Six.

<sup>26</sup> The Noble Qur'an 4:36

<sup>27</sup> Literally *al-jār al-junub* is the neighbour who is to the side; an outsider.

<sup>28</sup> Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabārī (838-923 C.E) was author of *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, commonly referred to as *Tafsīr al-Tabārī* (exegesis of al-Tabārī). His exegesis is heavily grounded in a thorough understanding of Arabic grammar and lexicon.

State discourse of Iraqi refugees in Syria commonly refers to the refugees as *ḍayūf* (guests). This brings with it the attendant notion of hospitality and the limits thereof. Derrida (2000:149-50) reminds us hospitality is intimately tied with ethics:

the problem of hospitality [is] coextensive with the ethical problem. It is always about answering for a dwelling place, for one's identity, one's space, one's limits, for the *ethos* as abode, habitation, house, hearth, family [and] home.

It is this juxtaposition of the Islamic *ethos* against the limits on hospitality imposed by the state which Iraqi refugees in Damascus negotiate. Later in the thesis, I consider ways in which the Syrian state and international agencies such as the UNHCR transfigure Iraqi refugees into a group pushed to the sides - a marginalised group. In Chapter Six, I take up Derrida's approach of understanding "home" or more precisely home-making as being the underlying sentiment or *ethos* which informs the religious beliefs and practices of Iraqi refugees. Moreover, I propose that home-making is the *eidos* or the concrete manifestation of religious ideas.

What remains true today, though, is that people continue to move and have maintained understandings of belonging and interconnectedness which extend beyond the nation-state, constituting both new and renewed forms of transnationalism.<sup>29</sup> Here I should clarify what I mean by tradition and religion. The two terms are used continuously throughout this thesis and demand careful definition.

### **1.3. Tradition and change**

My understanding of 'tradition' is framed by Edward Shils' (1971) notion, which examines tradition as the temporal character of social and belief systems. For Shils, traditions "are a consensus through time" (1971:126) in which new arrivals, be they a new-born child, a new employee, a new student, an immigrant, all encounter situations in which they are expected to conform to on-

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<sup>29</sup> This is particularly true for Iraqi refugees in Damascus and is a theme that I return to in Chapter Six.



going situations that will help gain them acceptance. Within this period of socialization, there lies a past which preceded the arrival of the newcomer and is the means by which the past is carried through into the present and beyond into the future. Moreover, what constitutes a tradition is an element of transmission; of both handing down and receiving tradition. Shils (1971:127) observes “a marked tendency for reception to be motivated by belief in the legitimacy of the authority of the recommender” and yet it is not always passive. Often, traditions are actively sought out to satisfy a need to be connected to the past in order to legitimate a way of being which the present will not allow (1971:133). I believe this to be central to an effective interpretation of the practices of Iraqi refugees in Syria. For Syrians and Iraqis alike, the highest legitimacy of authority in Islam rests with the Qur’an and in the example of the Prophet and his companions which is to be found in the *aḥadīth* literature and the legal opinions of the *mujtahids*. Before proceeding any further, let us briefly consider some illustrative examples in which religious traditions have been “re-energised”.

A striking example of how religious traditions have been mobilised and interpreted anew can be found in ways in which strands within Islamic political activism have been able to establish a revolutionary agenda. The dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and the ease with which religion had been marginalised and pushed out of the public sphere by Kemalists in Turkey, together with the rapid modernisation programmes of other countries of the Middle East, led Sayyid Qutb to recover the term *jaḥilīya*.<sup>30</sup> Under Qutb’s reformulation, the present *jaḥilīya* was extended to include predominantly Muslim countries<sup>31</sup> and considered to be far more pernicious than the original. Qutb writes (1974:87):

The clouds which weigh over man’s nature are thicker and denser than before. The previous ignorance of God was based on a general

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<sup>30</sup> Literally means ignorance and is used to refer to the time before the advent of Islam in the Arabian peninsula.

<sup>31</sup> Crooke (2009: 66-67) suggests that a decade in prison under the Nasserite regime, subject to arbitrary torture from his gaolers and having witnessed the murder of 21 of his fellow inmates by his gaolers left its mark on Qutb, convincing him that the society he lived in had once again slipped into the abyss of *jaḥilīya*.

ignorance, simplicity and primitiveness. That of the present is based on learning, complexity and frivolity.

Qutb railed against the Sunni establishment, which had allied itself with power since the time of the Umayyads. The living tradition of Islam, he maintained, had become detached from its origin. Islam in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century had been reduced to mere rites and rituals devoid of understanding. He argued, instead, for a return to the early community of Muslims as exemplars for how to confront the problems of modernity and tradition.

Shi'i thinkers in the twentieth century similarly cast new light on age-old traditions. Musa al-Sadr founded *Harakat al-Mahrumin*<sup>32</sup> (The Movement of the Deprived) which aimed at calling the Lebanese government to account for the socio-economic grievances of the Shi'i of South Lebanon. Re-imagining and mobilizing Imam Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala in 680 C.E, Musa al-Sadr shifted the narrative from one of victimhood and dispossession to one of revolutionary politics. Imam Hussein and his band of brothers were now re-cast as fighters against injustice refusing to cower before tyranny and illegitimate power, and as upholders of a moral and religious revolution inherited from Imam Hussein's grandfather - the Prophet Muhammad. On the occasion of 'Ashūra in 1974 commemorating this pivotal moment of Islamic history, Musa al-Sadr proclaimed:

This revolution did not die in the sands of Karbala, it flowed into the life stream of the Islamic world, and passed from generation to generation, even to our day. It is a deposit placed in our hands so that we may profit from it, that we may extract from it a new source of reform, a new position, a new movement, a new revolution, to repel the darkness, to stop tyranny and to pulverise evil [...] Brothers, line up in the row of your choice: that of tyranny or that of Hussein. I am certain that you will not

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<sup>32</sup> The outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in 1975 led to a formation of a military wing attached to the movement, *Afwaj al-Muqawwama al-Lubnaniya* (the Lebanese Resistance Detachments) more commonly referred to as AMAL which was to play an ever greater role in Lebanon during the civil war.

choose anything but the row of revolution and martyrdom for the realization of justice and the destruction of injustice.<sup>33</sup>

It has been argued elsewhere that the Qur'an and *aḥadīth* have historically been read and interpreted by men in a patriarchal context and by and large women have been socialized into accepting these readings as wholly authentic (Barlas 2002). Such gendered readings of religious texts can also be seen as an example of how traditions can be re-interpreted and mobilised to advance claims made by marginalised groups in contemporary societies. Similarly, Iraqi refugees find themselves at the margins of society, and as Shils (1971:133) so aptly puts it: "are in search of traditional beliefs to which to attach themselves, to "create a past" for themselves which will legitimate them in a way which just being themselves in the present will not allow them to do."

#### 1.4. Understanding religion

As a Muslim, I find it difficult to reconcile myself to reductionist views of religion,<sup>34</sup> especially if it is presented as pathology. This is not to say that in the

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<sup>33</sup> *Al-Hayat* 1 February 1974, cited in Norton (1987:40-41).

<sup>34</sup> Emile Durkheim pointed out that the socialization of people begins before they enter the world; the edifice of a social framework is already in place waiting to impose itself on us; to mould our thoughts and perceptions and to guide our actions. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (2001: 159) tells us: "We speak a language we have not created; we use tools we have not invented; we invoke rights we have not instituted; each generation inherits a treasure trove of knowledge it did not amass itself."

For Durkheim, this repository of social facts is where our attentions ought to be focused if we are to understand what religion is and how it comes into being or as he puts it: "religion is something eminently social" (Durkheim 2001:11). The cornerstone of Durkheim's theory of religion posits that the sacred is the concern of religious rites practised socially whereas the profane is relegated to individual private affairs. Furthermore, the sacred "is superimposed on the real" (2001:317) creating an ideal world which exists in the imagination of man. My research in Damascus has brought forward understandings of religion proffered by Iraqi Muslim refugees which suggests that the sacred is potentially everywhere: the profane is made sacred through intention. This is confirmed in the Islamic tradition. 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, reported that the Messenger of Allah said:

The reward of deeds depends upon the intentions and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended. Whoever's emigration is for Allah and His Messenger then his emigration is for Allah and His Messenger. Whoever's emigration is for some worldly gain which he can acquire or a woman he will marry then his emigration is for that for which he emigrated (Sahīh Bukhāri Vol.1, Book 001, Number 001).

The hadīth is considered a foundational one: both Muslim and Al-Bukhāri begins their collections with the hadīth and Imam Sha'fi is reported to have said that it "constitutes a third of all knowledge". How useful then is the sacred/profane distinction as outlined by Durkheim if all possible human action can be posited as sacred? If this is true then the sacred, for those who practise Islam, is not "superimposed on the real" it *is* real. Nonetheless, Durkheim's suggestion that religion is a body of accumulated knowledge which is transmitted from generation to generation will be helpful to my inquiry into how Iraqi refugees mobilise cultural resources in an attempt to recapture the capabilities they had prior to displacement.

religious experiences and practices of Muslims a factor such as economic injustice does not explain in part their behaviour or that some Islamic practices have a wider social or psychological function; but it cannot fully explain the “moods and motivations” (Geertz 1973:90) of women and men who participate in religious practices or have had religious experiences. Durkheim (2001:312) tells us that “[i]n fact anyone who has really practised a religion knows very well that it is the cult that evokes these impressions of joy, of inner peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm [...] it is always the cult that is efficacious.” Elsewhere, Durkheim refers to the emotions evoked through the cult as “collective effervescence” (2001:171).<sup>35</sup>

The position I take recognises that religion acts as a palliative to the real economic distress that people are faced with. “Religion”, Marx ([1955] 1985:11) tells us, “is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation” before reminding us of the numbing quality of religion with the oft-quoted line “[i]t is the *opium* of the people.” Thus Marx alludes to the sphere of religious activity as a contested site: ordinary people, religious institutions and the state can all line up to contest the meaning of religious traditions. As such, I suggest that religion is more than just cultic devotion: it is moral action wherein a life well-lived is one that is in accordance with God's commands (Kant [1795] 2005). This allows for a more nuanced understanding of religion. It enables us to capture the notion that religious traditions are understood and acted upon in specific contexts - in this case, an understanding of contemporary Islamic thought and practices in the Middle East with due consideration given to the specific circumstances of the mass displacement of Iraqi Muslims is required.

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In Marx's view, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (Marx & Engels 1998:14). It is economic life that forms the ‘base’ of society, all other spheres of activity are epiphenomenal and belong to the ‘superstructure’ including institutions such as religion which exist to contain the class struggle. Here, we can see the common theme that runs through the work of Durkheim and Marx; by starting at the point that religion is a reflection of something else, it follows that there must be a rational explanation for its enduring appeal as a means by which the lives of men and women are organised. The assumption that religion is something other than itself leads back to this starting point forming a circular argument.

<sup>35</sup> Although many anthropologists focus on rites and festivals in their consideration of religion, Durkheim (2001:323) reminds us that the cult is “not all there is to religion.”

Working both with and against Tweed (2006), I will be drawing on his “trans-temporal” and “trans-locative” understanding of religious experience and practice, which calls on tropes of dwelling and crossing that I believe will enable me to offer an analysis of the dynamics of religion in the transnational space that many refugees occupy today. Drawing on insights from anthropology and cultural geography, Tweed’s interpretation of religious experience and practice is based on an extensive ethnographic study of the Cuban Diaspora at a local shrine in Miami from which he defines religion as “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (Tweed 2006:54).

The utility of this definition lies in Tweed’s use of the twin metaphors of religion as both dwelling and crossing. The use of these metaphors opens avenues to consider how Iraqi refugees orient themselves in space and time in the wake of forced displacements which have affected ways in which domestic and neighbourhood space is inscribed with religious significance and how Islamic traditions inform their positioning within social space. Moreover, the notion of movement and flux inherent in this definition captures the dynamics of tradition being interpreted anew as a means to satisfy a need to be connected to the past in order to legitimate a way of being which the present will not allow (Shils, 1971:133). Refugees are active social agents; dwelling does not imply passivity. Rather, it refers to the transformation of what may be alien surroundings into an inhabitable world of their own construction. As Tweed points out (2006:82), dwelling “is a verbal noun, and that signals something important; dwelling like crossing, is doing [...] It refers to the confluence of organic-cultural flows that allows devotees to map, build and inhabit worlds. It is homemaking.”

### **1.5. Religious practices: in the shadow of the state**

In light of the earlier discussion on hospitality, conceptualizing religion as dwelling and crossing takes on added significance for refugee populations. Crossings necessarily indicate boundaries and I have already suggested that it is the state which plays a leading role in demarcating these boundaries. Tweed (2006:54) acknowledges that his definition of religion is “stipulative” and that there may be “blind-spots” which from his position as researcher he has been

unable to identify. In the case of refugees, his definition neglects to fully address the role of institutions and structures; chief amongst them being the state, which influence the practices and decision-making of refugees. His ethnographic study of Cuban migrants in Miami in the early 1990s presents a skewed analysis of refugee experience, in that he fails to address the fact that under the rubric of the Cold War, the Cuban Diaspora in the United States had up until the late 1980s enjoyed a uniquely privileged position with respect to its relationship with the host government (Masud-Piloto 1996). The refugees who gathered at the shrine in Miami were ideologically in-line with and supported by the cold-war political agendas of the host state. Observing the crowd gathered at the shrine, Tweed (2006:6) notes:

“The chants from the crowd of ‘Salva a Cuba’ and the floral message ‘Libre 94’ looked towards the future and expressed a hope – that the national patroness would bring democracy and capitalism to Cuba.”

And yet, Tweed fails to take this opportunity to examine closer the linkages between US policy and the reception of the Cuban refugees in Miami. What were the conditions which prompted the Cuban community in Miami to conflate nationalist politics with the practising of their faith? What role did the clergy play in Cuban politics before, during and after the 1959 Socialist Revolution? Is there an inherent link connecting democracy, capitalism and religion in Cuba? If so - why? These are questions that Tweed overlooks and deserve consideration when examining the role of religion in the lives of forced migrants. The patronage of the host state is not as readily accessible to Iraqi refugees as it was for the Cuban exiles – the focus of Tweed’s study. Iraqi forced migrants, though granted access to a safe haven in Syria, are denied the right to work by virtue of their “tourist” entry status (though they have a presence in the informal sector) and have limited access to healthcare and education.

In the case of Syria, where religious institutions had been incorporated into the bureaucratic apparatus of the state<sup>36</sup> under the Ottoman Empire (Zubaida

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<sup>36</sup> This is still the case today. The extent of Syrian governmental involvement in the operational activities of religious networks and institutions can be measured by the power of the ministry of religious affairs to sanction the existence of 540 Islamic associations, whereas independent political parties and

1995), it becomes evident that religious resources are more than just cognitive, moral and emotional processes in character but are social and cultural in composition also. The co-option of religious bodies by the state is significant in that it points to the salience of religious capital in the over-arching field of power. To compensate for Tweed's neglect of the role of the state in accounting for how religion is manifested in social space, I will employ a Bourdieuan framework.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, it is my initial contention that since the 1991 Gulf War the decimation of the civilian infrastructure under the UN sanctions regime (Anderson and Stansfield 2004) and the failure of the Iraqi state post the American invasion to ensure a minimum adequate level of provision for its people has meant that in Iraq non-state actors, particularly religious networks and institutions, have stepped in to meet the welfare needs of the Iraqi people.

Carle and Chkam (2006:3) note an exponential increase in the number of local NGOs in Iraq, rising from around 400 in early 2004 to an estimated 12,000 by 2006. This is certainly not the case in Syria where the state has not retreated similarly from its welfare commitments. The Syrian government exerts strict control over import and export of agricultural produce and has made the availability of subsidised food and fuel the cornerstone of its domestic economic policy (IRIN 2008). However, with fuel subsidies accounting for just below 29% of Syria's GDP and with dwindling oil revenues, the Syrian government has announced a phased withdrawal of fuel subsidies.<sup>38</sup> To mitigate the effect of proposed cuts, which have already resulted in an increase in food prices, the Syrian government has introduced heating coupons for families; limited compensation for small businesses; and a 25% pay increase in the public sector which accounts for a working population of two million people (IRIN, 2008). Such measures, though, do not extend to the 1.5 million Iraqi refugees estimated to be living in Syria.

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human rights organisations are routinely denied permission to operate (Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2008).

<sup>37</sup> This is explored in greater depth in Chapter Five.

<sup>38</sup> "Syria Announces Plan to Phase Out Fuel Subsidies", Global Subsidies Initiative. Available at: <http://www.globalsubsidies.org/en/subsidy-watch/news/syria-announces-plan-phase-out-fuel-subsidies> [Accessed on 05 February 2010].

Only recently, the Syrian government relented under the pressures of hosting such a considerable number of refugees and signed a memorandum of understanding with 14 international NGOs (Sassoon 2009:126). In spite of stipulations put in place by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour to prevent local NGOs from working with refugees, faith-based organisations have an active, albeit low-key presence in refugee neighbourhoods (ibid:127). Thus Iraqi refugees who have witnessed the collapse of welfare provision from the state since 2003 and have become more reliant on tribal and religious solidarities to secure access to welfare, have perhaps brought with them survival strategies that may not match expectations they have for the role of religious networks and institutions in Syria. In the following section, I elaborate on how mobilisation of various resources by Iraqi refugees can instigate change in their circumstances.

### **1.6. The mobilisation of capital**

Nicholas Van Hear (2006) has made the case that, with increasingly restrictive immigration policies pursued by countries of the Global North, migrants' access and ability to mobilise and transform various forms of capital is becoming increasingly fundamental to understanding patterns and consequences of migratory movements. His work on the experiences of Sri Lankan refugees draws attention to both the salience of access to capital in shaping patterns of migration from Sri Lanka and the importance of integrating various forms of capital into our analysis. Key questions prompted by Van Hear's discussion are: How do Iraqi refugees convert non-material forms of capital into an appropriate volume and structure of capital which will allow them to pursue their strategies of choice? How do religious networks and institutions help or hinder in the conversion of non-material forms of capital? How does religious capital figure in the lives of Iraqi refugees? My inquiry will investigate whether Iraqi forced migrants have the necessary cultural and social capital to negotiate their position within a receiving country that may have constructed negative discourses around the figure of the refugee, thereby re-negotiating the label of 'other' as imposed by the state.

By critically engaging with the writings of Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1989, 1990a, 1991), I intend to examine the significance of Islamic traditions of asylum in the



life-worlds of Iraqi forced migrants and how they are able to mobilise non-material “religious resources” to help gain access to further material resources - and to consider the extent to which Iraqi refugees are prevented from securing access to resources by religious networks and institutions. I now briefly survey the literature on various forms of non-material capital.

There are numerous definitions of what constitutes social capital (Bourdieu 1986, Coleman 1994, Putnam 1995). For many commentators, the ubiquitous use of the term in a multitude of contexts over the past 15 years means that it has lost coherence, threatening its utility to researchers (Portes, 1998). With this in mind, I heed the advice of Patulny & Svendsen (2007), who urge researchers to adopt a more transparent approach when considering social capital, clearly distinguishing any divergent concepts that have emerged from recent debates.

In *The Forms of Capital* Bourdieu (1986) seeks to clarify what constitutes capital through a close examination of social relations at the micro-level. Despite crediting economists with the introduction of the notion of “human capital”, he chastises them for having paid scant attention to the human aspect, arguing that economists including Marx failed to make the distinction between objectified and non-material forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986:243). The taxonomy of capital introduced by Bourdieu includes *economic*, *cultural*, and *social capital*. The two latter forms are often “misrecognised” as not being capital as they are not *immediately* convertible into money. Cultural capital can take an embodied<sup>39</sup> form in the form of habitus;<sup>40</sup> it can also be objectified in the guise of cultural goods such as art, cinema, literature, or can even appear in an institutionalised state in the form of educational qualifications<sup>41</sup> (ibid). For

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<sup>39</sup> For Bourdieu, the embodied form of cultural capital is not only what is consciously acquired but also that which is acquired through socialisation. Here Bourdieu borrows from Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty in particular, the idea that our experience of the world is opened up to us through our bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1962:146). Elsewhere, Bourdieu (1985b:113) employs the term habitus as “the social inscribed in the body of a biological individual”.

<sup>40</sup> This term is elaborated on at further length later in this chapter.

<sup>41</sup> Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of non-material forms of capital was a result of an inquiry into the causes of academic success; tracing the academic success (or lack of) attained by students not to the aptitude and diligence of the students as was commonly thought, but to “the fact that the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family[...] the

Bourdieu, the embodied form of cultural capital is “predisposed to function as symbolic capital” (1986:245) and as such is often misrecognised.

Bourdieu’s (1986) understanding of social capital emphasises ways in which relationships enable individuals, families, and other groups to influence access to resources. He defines social capital as being a “network of relationships [which are] the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term” (1986:245). Implicit in this approach is the idea of inequality in power relations and opportunities. In the case of Iraqi refugees in Syria, Christian and Shi’i refugees arguably have greater opportunity for onward migration<sup>42</sup> as the religious networks and institutions that cater for the needs of these particular groups have more extensive transnational connections than Sunni networks and institutions. It is worth mentioning here also that although debates on social capital have only emerged in academia over the past two decades, it is a concept that can be crudely equated with *wāsta* (brokerage connections), which is prevalent in vernacular discourses and a commonly accepted cultural norm in Arab countries.<sup>43</sup>

Here, I would also counter Bourdieu’s proposition that relationships are but products of investment strategies - for Bourdieu, self-interest is the defining trait of the human condition much like Sayyid Qutb’s description of man without faith being a “passionate self-lover” (Qutb 1979:261) and yet the teachings of many religions provide man with a reconfiguring of human relationships where self-interest is subordinate to a more altruistic understanding of the human

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economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up.” (Bourdieu 1989:244)

<sup>42</sup> This is one example, access to education and healthcare services are another.

<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, Bourdieu writing on the encounter between a largely agrarian Algerian society and the imposition of a capitalist economy through the French colonial adventure recognises the salience of this cultural norm many years before he had articulated his notion of the various immaterial forms of capital. He observes:

recourse to personal relationships is favoured by the whole cultural tradition which encourages and demands solidarity and mutual aid: the man who has succeeded must use his own success to help others, starting with the members of his own family; every self-respecting individual feels responsible for several more or less close relatives, for whom it is his duty among other things, to find work by using his position and his personal connections. Nepotism is a virtue here (Bourdieu 1979:35-36).

condition. Bourdieu fails to consider that in the case of monotheist faiths, self-interest extends beyond the temporality of this world. In the Islamic tradition, God declares:

“O you who believe! Shall I lead you to a merchandise which may deliver you from a painful chastisement?

You shall believe in Allah and his Messenger, and struggle hard in Allah’s way with your property and your lives; that is better for you, did you but know!”<sup>44</sup>

The binary of exclusive and inclusive social capital put forth by Robert Putnam<sup>45</sup> (1995) led Portes and Landolt (1996:21) to question the dominant “celebratory view of social capital” which had been embraced by policy makers the world over. They ask whether it could in fact have negative consequences as per Bourdieu. Portes (1998:21) concludes that “social ties can bring about greater control over wayward behaviour and provide privileged access to resources; they can also restrict individual freedoms, and bar outsiders from gaining access to the same resources through particularistic preferences.”

I would suggest that the normalising effects of religion are widely accepted and encourage behavioural conformity. In the case of Iraqi forced migrants in Syria, I would also contend that the sectarian dimension of the conflict in Iraq may have coloured the experiences of forced migrants thereby resulting in people expressing a tendency towards “particularised trust” (Uslaner 2002)

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<sup>44</sup> The Noble Qur’an 61:10-11

<sup>45</sup> Putnam (1995:664) - adopting a more institutional approach - defines social capital as “features of social life-networks, norms and trust- that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”. In later works, Putnam provides us with a further useful distinction between the forms of social capital by introducing ‘bridging’ and bonding’ social capital: Bonding social capital (BOSC) concerns the ties that people make based on homogeneity or that which “bolsters our narrower selves” (Putnam 2000:22-23) such as a shared clan membership or ethnicity, a corollary of which is the risk of communities becoming introspective and withdrawn (Cheong et al 2007). Bridging social capital (BRSC), on the other hand, looks to establish ties across voluntary organisations, transcending differences of language, ethnicity or religion and is considered more valuable in the promotion of social cohesion and as a sop against rising xenophobia and racism (Korac 2005). Following Putnam (2000:21), we can define BRSC as social networks that are “outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages.” Mosques and churches are a good example of where there can be a convergence of both bridging and bonding social capital. Furbey et al (2006:51) note: “faith buildings stand as physical markers of presence and diversity. In many instances they become places where community activity and development are focused, leading to opportunities for bridging and linking within, across and beyond faiths to wider communities”.

characterised by a distrust of outsiders and little co-operation between groups, highlighting the very same cleavages where access and provision of resources for refugees is concerned. The impact of sectarianism on Iraqi refugee attitudes towards religious actors, networks and institutions is examined in Chapter four. Let us now explore further, beyond the various forms of capital, the possibilities offered by Bourdieu's theory of practice to better understand strategies employed by Iraqi forced migrants.

### **1.7. Bourdieu and religion**

Having faith in a religious belief is not wholly an individual experience, age old traditions are re-negotiated, re-interpreted and filtered through the experience of living in the contemporary world. Religion moves beyond being just a social institution, it becomes a cultural resource which is actively mobilised rather than passively consumed. This can affect power relations as religion is disseminated through new technologies and occupies previously unseen spaces. Commenting on the deregulation of religion in a seemingly secularized world, James Beckford (1989:170) endorses this view. He suggests:

Religion has come adrift from its former points of anchorage but is no less potentially powerful as a result. It remains a potent cultural resource or form which may act as the vehicle of change, challenge or conservation. Consequently, religion has become less predictable. The capacity to mobilize people and material resources remains strong, but it is likely to be mobilized in unexpected places and in ways which may be in tension with 'establishment' practices and public policy.

To better understand how religion as a cultural resource may instigate change let us return to Bourdieu's theory of practice. This is perhaps best viewed as a methodological statement complete with a conceptual tool-kit which helps the sociologist to dissect society exposing dominant power relations that lie beneath the surface of things. Put simply it can be summarised thus: the actions of people, *practice*, unfold in a multitude of interconnected and occasionally coinciding *fields* that in aggregate comprise the multidimensional space that we call society. For Bourdieu, self-interest is characteristic of the human condition

and in particular involves the pursuit of the many forms of *capital*. This in turn, is conditioned by *habitus*, which filters perceptions of the world and gives people a sense of taste; a disposition.<sup>46</sup> Life, however, is not a level playing field and through the mechanism of *symbolic violence* distinctions between individuals and groups are maintained which allow for the domination of one over the other, though this is not always recognised as such.

Misrecognition of the constructed social world as something natural is brought about when the non-material forms of capital or symbolic capital are not recognised as such and are put to use as mechanisms of indirect social control. Bourdieu (1990a:127), drawing on the works of Marcel Mauss, cites “all of the virtues honoured by the ethic of honour” that is, gifts, hospitality, obligations and duties, as examples of “gentle, invisible violence” (ibid). A corollary of such mechanisms for Mahar et.al (1990:14) is in Bourdieuan terms “symbolic violence”:

because those who do not have ‘the means of speech’, or do not know how to ‘take the floor’, can only see themselves in the words or discourse of others - that is, those who are legitimate authorities and who can name and represent.

Forcibly displaced people are particularly susceptible to symbolic violence, as Roger Zetter (1991) has amply demonstrated – refugees inhabit a highly institutionalized intersection of social space where they are in contact with NGOs, inter-governmental agencies and various state bodies. Consequently, refugees are subjected to a bureaucratic labelling process which is used instrumentally and demands conformity on the part of those displaced in exchange for much needed resources.

These observations are echoed in the work of the social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai commenting on the powerlessness experienced by slum-dwellers in India who, imbued with negative terms of recognition, gradually subscribe to

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<sup>46</sup> The term disposition is one that I use recurrently throughout this thesis. From my reading of Bourdieu, I take it to mean the inclination or natural tendency an individual has to taking a particular position in a specific field.

norms “whose social effect is to further diminish their dignity, exacerbate their inequality, and deepen their lack of access to material goods and services” (Appadurai 2004:66). Similarly, Iraqi forced migrants constitute a marginalised group recognised negatively in official discourses as refugees. They too occupy a position in the social and geographic space of Syria wherein the struggle to appropriate resources may activate a network of hitherto unseen relations.

In Bourdieuan terms, the care/control for the bodies and souls of people is the field of struggle in which diverse actors including the state, humanitarian agencies, religious institutions, actors in the medical professions as well as forced migrants “struggle over the symbolic manipulation of the conduct of private life and the orientation of one’s vision of the world” (Bourdieu 1987:119). A consequence of this struggle is that it gives rise to opposing and contradictory definitions and meanings for religious ideas. In what follows, I briefly put forward the core concepts of Bourdieu’s analytical grid, paying particular attention to how Bourdieu suggests agency of individuals is constrained by external structures and how this better helps us understand the survival strategies of Iraqi refugees in Syria.

### **1.8. Key concepts**

The concept of habitus lies at the heart of Bourdieu’s theory of practice. Bourdieu offers a multitude of definitions of the term: In *The logic of practice*, he defines habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures *predisposed* to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends” (Bourdieu 1990a:53). Echoing Edward Shils (1971) treatment of tradition, he tells us that the habitus is the “past which survives in the present” (Bourdieu 1977:82) or an “embodied history, internalized as a second nature [...] the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (1990a:56). Elsewhere, he likens *habitus* to a “conductorless orchestration which gives regularity, unity and systemacity to practices” (1990a:59).

Under what conditions is a particular disposition inculcated and can it be tempered to become irrelevant? These are questions Bernard Lahire (2003) reminds us we must always keep in mind when considering habitus. Lahire (2003:342) observes that not all dispositions are acted upon and are in fact only activated under particular circumstances. I contend that there is a particular *Islamic habitus* which needs to be considered in the case of Iraqi refugees in Damascus. The sectarianism which blighted Iraq over the past two decades has undoubtedly impacted on people's attitudes and dispositions towards religion, religious actors and institutions.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, although Bourdieu's writing on religion focused almost exclusively on Catholicism, his earlier work (before he had fully formulated his core concepts) hints at an *Islamic habitus*. Bourdieu's ethnographic work on the Mزاب region of Algeria shows us that he found the extent to which Islam permeated the lives of his informants was more profound than he could have imagined. In *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (1958) later translated into English as *The Algerians*, he writes:

Everywhere in the Maghreb may be seen the imprint and the ascendancy of Islam, no matter how restricted a social unit may be, it examines, elaborates or reinterprets itself by reference to Koranic [sic.] dogma [...] There is the feeling of belonging to a community of believers. Of belonging to the 'House of Islam'. In short, it is the atmosphere of Islam that permeates all of life, not only religious or intellectual life, but private, social and professional life (Bourdieu 1962:107-108).

I am not suggesting that Islam is the only way to understand complex societies such as Iraq or Syria, but it is perhaps more useful to think of Islam as a "master signifier" which unifies and totalizes a multiplicity of discourses in Muslim societies (Sayyid 2003:45-46). Religious narratives can be viewed as master narratives which compete and interact with other master-narratives such as that of the nation-state. They can also be used to structure counter-narratives produced by subalterns and marginalised groups to help negotiate their position in social space and to formulate strategies that aim to strengthen the volume

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<sup>47</sup> In Chapter Four I explore how sectarianism impacted on my participants attitudes towards religious actors and institutions.

and structure of capital to which they have access or to mobilize religion “in unexpected places” as Beckford (1989:170) puts it.

Building on the Weberian idea of an economy of salvation in which charismatic priests, prophets and sorcerers are able to impose on the laity<sup>48</sup> a particular world-view through the control of “salvation goods”, Bourdieu arrived at the idea of “field”. Stephen Foster (1986:103) helps us to understand Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of field by considering associate meanings of words such as “force-field” and “battlefield”: thus, a field is where the struggle over various forms of capital is located. It is within this field that agents (often consumers of capital) and institutions (often producers of capital) take their positions. These positions are contingent on the quantity and the form of capital to which individuals and groups have access. Given that humans are motivated by self-interest, strategies are developed to improve the quality and quantity of capital in our possession. Bourdieu maintains we ought to regard a field as “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97). This is a key point. Bourdieu’s notion of field reminds us that social actors take up positions which are relative to one another. Thus, I contend that religion organizes social practice such that the “relational-self” or an individual’s multi-faceted relationships with other actors across a number of fields is at the core of how the world should be experienced. This is an issue more fully examined in Chapters five and six.

### **1.9. Critiquing Bourdieu’s sociology of religion**

Bourdieu’s seminal works were mainly concerned with the sociology of culture and education, with a particular emphasis on the study of power and its correlation with social deprivation: he was less interested in religion per se (Dianteill, 2003). On the few occasions he articulates a position on religion he has been labelled as “voltairean”, “unidimensional” and “too insular” (Verter, 2003:151-6); “hostile”, “pessimistic and static” (Urban 2003:355-36). Others

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<sup>48</sup> The term “laity” is used by Bourdieu in the context of a hierarchical Catholic Church. Though it can be argued that such a distinction exists in Shi’i Islam and variants of Sufi Islam, the same cannot be said of orthodox Sunni Islam. For the purposes of this thesis the term “laity” is used interchangeably with “people” and “ordinary people” to distinguish from religious professionals. It is not used implying hierarchy.



have suggested that his limited commentary on religion leaves nothing more than “a sociology of Catholicism” (Dianteill 2003:535) in which he fails to consider “the possibility of a struggle towards a non-competitively defined religious field” (Tanner 2005:23). Yet paradoxically, in formulating his “theory of practice” Bourdieu is hugely indebted to the canonical theorists of religion - Durkheim, Weber and Marx – and to the philosophical insights of the devoutly Catholic Blaise Pascal, providing researchers with concepts and ideas that are immensely useful in the interpretation of religious practices. Dianteill (2003:530) notes: “In Bourdieu's work, the notions of ‘belief,’ ‘field’ or ‘habitus’ always result from the social sciences of religion (sociology, anthropology, and history). From this point of view, Bourdieu's work is almost a ‘generalized’ sociology of religion”.

In *Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field* Bourdieu (1991) demonstrates his indebtedness to Weber when he observes that with a move from rural to urban centres, human existence was explained in increasingly “rationalized” terms creating “a body of specialists in the administration of religious goods” (Bourdieu, 1991:6). This is pivotal for Bourdieu as the monopoly held by such “specialists” – here meaning the Catholic Church – helped maintain distinctions and legitimate the social inequalities between individuals and classes. Written out of this account are ordinary people, who are described as being “dispossessed” and “excluded” from the production of religious capital and thereby become “profane” (1991:9). Ever suspicious of religion and with a nod and a wink to Engels and Marx, he writes:

If there are social functions of religion and consequently, if religion is amenable to sociological analysis, it is because laypeople do not – or not only – expect from it justifications for existence capable of freeing them from the existential anguish or contingency and dereliction or even biological misery, sickness, suffering or death, but also and above all justifications for existing in a determinate social position and existing as they exist (Bourdieu 1991:16).

In other words, through the ability to consecrate and legitimate the prevailing social order the clerical class is able to convince people that their social position is appropriate; inculcating their world-view into the perceptions and thoughts of people and naturalizing the status-quo. However, this is a somewhat narrow understanding of the role or status of the clergy in the field of politics. There is an assumption here that the interests of the clergy are monolithic and closely correlated with those of the state. The recent history of Iraq has shown that the picture is far more complex. There are, in fact, a number of competing religious powers, not all of whom are aligned with the state.<sup>49</sup>

The exile of clerics has been a recurrent feature of Iraqi politics since the 1920 revolt which sought to eject the British from Iraq. Leading *mujtahids* were deported to Iran only to be recalled from exile for fear of damaging British interests in that country, on the condition that they abstain from political activities and limit their roles to that of custodians of a carefully circumscribed religious culture. In addition, Iraqi governments have continually made recourse to charging Iraqi Shi'i as being of Iranian origin - a pretext for deportation (Babakhan 2002).

It was not until the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in 1958 that there appeared a robust Shi'i political party in the form of the Hizb al-Da'wa (the Party for the Call of Islam) founded by Hadi al-Subayti, Talib al-Rifa'i and Mahdi al-Hakim (al-Qazwini 2002). From the time of its inception until the summer of 1979 following the epochal Islamic revolution in Iran, the members of Hizb al-Da'wa remained active in clandestinely propagating their message. Thereafter, they openly proclaimed their political vision, sparking an escalation of violent confrontation with the apparatus of the Ba'thist regime which culminated in Saddam Hussein's regime making membership of Hizb al-Da'wa a capital offence and the execution of Baqir al-Sadr (the leading cleric of the party) and his sister Bint al-Huda in April 1980 (al-Ruhaimi 2002).

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<sup>49</sup> In fact, it could be argued that tensions between the majority Shi'i population of Iraq and the Sunni elites that have wielded political power over them date as far back as the early 16th century when the Safavid and Ottoman empires battled for control over Baghdad.

With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, many Hizb al-Da'wa activists fled across the border to Iran causing fragmentation in the ranks of the party as the war dragged on (ibid). It was also in exile in Tehran in 1982 that the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) was formed. On the eve of the US-led invasion of Iraq, the religious parties including Hizb al-Da'wa and SCIRI had positioned themselves to fill the vacuum created by regime change (Abdul-Jabar 2003a).<sup>50</sup>

Until the downfall of the Ba'thist regime in 2003, Iraqi - particularly Shi'i - religious networks had extended beyond national borders and had mobilised their capacities in opposition to the Ba'thist regime while in exile. My fieldwork in Damascus helps uncover the extent to which Iraq religious networks have been replicated in Syria - and to whether the particular experience of displacement and exile over the past three decades has shaped the reception of more recent arrivals.

A key collaborator and interpreter of Bourdieu's work, Loïc Wacquant, notes: "to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:xiv). With this in mind, it is worth mentioning that Bourdieu's attitude towards religion is not untypical of post-Enlightenment thinking; the particular historical experience of Europe saw a shift away from a communitarian ethos to one of privileging the individual (Crooke 2009). This is the context in which Pierre Bourdieu's own habitus was formed. Thus for Bourdieu, religion becomes almost synonymous with the Catholic Church and its attendant history of domination and accumulation of wealth and power. Herein lays the difficulty with Bourdieu's approach to religion: conflating religion with the institutions of religion he has reduced it to being an organisational means through which the interests of the few are able to dominate, exploit and oppress the many.

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<sup>50</sup> In an opposition congress held in London in December 2002, over a quarter of the members chosen to be on the Committee of Co-ordination and Follow-up were affiliated to SCIRI. The final communiqué of the gathering read *al-Islam masdar al-tashri'* or Islam is *the* source of legislation (Abdul-Jabar 2003a:14); giving a clear indication of the direction in which the conflict was to take.

To single out the formation of Bourdieu's habitus while remaining silent on my own would be disingenuous at the least and contrary to the sociological project as envisioned by Bourdieu who encouraged reflexivity on the part of the researcher. I readily label myself as Muslim. Though not a scholar of Islam in any sense, I have a familiarity with the history, culture and traditions of Islam having been brought up in a conservative Kashmiri household in a working class neighbourhood of East London and have intermittently been engaged with faith-based community initiatives. Consequently, I find it difficult to ascribe to religion as understood by Bourdieu. This is not to suggest that religious traditions and religious institutions may not be mechanisms of "symbolic violence", which conceal relations of domination as something legitimate – history has shown otherwise. However, in dismissing religion as an anachronism and disregarding religion as disposition, Bourdieu's institutional emphasis on the production of religious goods (Martin 2000, Dillon 2001) has failed to recognise the agency of the subaltern who mobilises religion to improve the conditions of his/her life in this corporeal world. In doing so, Bourdieu paradoxically downplays the significance of the systems of meaning produced by those who ascribe to a religious belief (Rey 2007). Having examined the literature on Bourdieu with respect to religion and the various critiques of his theory, I will now explore the possibility of extending Bourdieu's conceptual framework to see whether it is applicable to the subject of our concern: Iraqi Muslim refugees in Syria.

#### **1.10. How hierarchical is Islam?**

Clearly, Bourdieu's treatment of religion was viewed through the lens of a laity dominated by a powerful Catholic Church that privileged certain religious actors over others. But does the same apply to Islam? Discussions on Islam often posit a neat taxonomy of "urban" and a "folk" Islam based on the dialectic between the scriptural *'ulamā*-led city and the mysticism of the tribes marshalled by a charismatic saint (Gellner 1981). Under this model, the state leads a precarious existence in keeping the tribes at bay and maintaining the support of the *'ulamā*, who authorise the legitimacy of the state, who unlike their Catholic counterparts were "without a central secretariat, general organisation, formal

hierarchy, or any machinery for convening periodic councils” (Gellner 1981:56). For Gellner (1981:55), traditional orientalist thinking is turned on its head and the state is no longer despotic; rather, Muslim society can be characterized as “[a] weak state and a strong culture”. In addition, the power of the tribes has succumbed to modernity and been effaced while mass literacy and migration to urban centres has strengthened the hand of the *‘ulamā*, who wield control over the symbols of legitimacy through a scriptural understanding of Islam.

There are flaws to this argument. Firstly, Zubaida (1995) questions the validity of such a model, arguing that Gellner over-generalised in putting forth a sociology of Islam, citing the example of the Ottoman state as the square peg which resolutely fails to fit into Gellner’s otherwise neat theory. Hitting on the novel idea of paying the *‘ulamā*; the Ottoman state established a hierarchy of religious functionaries who held positions in the legal or teaching professions. Zubaida (1995:158) insists: “[a]t the heart of the Ottoman state, then, the ulama [sic] were organized: not as a church, but as a department of state and, as such, as full participants in the bureaucratic politics of the state” [emphasis original]. In addition, the *‘ulamā* were also organised through *awqāf* establishments, the Sufi orders and through their extensive networks that connected them to clan, guilds and the world of commerce (Zubaida 1995:159). Secondly, Gellner’s insistence that the power of tribal solidarities had been diminished with the onset of modernity is not borne out in the case of Iraqi society. This theme is explored in greater depth in Chapters Four and Five.

Although Zubaida provides us with an historical treatment of Gellner’s sociology of Islam, it is worth noting that for the purposes of our study they are salient points. The countries we are dealing with are Syria and Iraq, both of which were subject to Ottoman suzerainty for just under four hundred years. Following the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the modern states of Iraq and Syria, the governments of both countries adopted some of the bureaucracy bequeathed to them by the Ottoman legacy.<sup>51</sup> Thus, as a functioning arm of the state apparatus, religious authorities have been and continue to be used to

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<sup>51</sup> The complexity of the relationship between religious institutions and the state in Syria is discussed further in Chapter Five.

endorse state positions to legitimate the social condition of people and justify state policy. As per Bourdieu (1991:5), “the question of the political function that religion fulfils for various social classes in a given social formation” is a key concern. Institutions and social agents battle it out for the right to consecrate and legitimate the conditions of their existence.

This thesis considers the possibility that it is the rupture of displacement which affords Iraqi forced migrants in Damascus the possibility to re-imagine or re-energise past traditions as well as having access to a shared cultural capital which transcend borders across the Middle-East. The following section serves to outline the various modes of protection available to forced migrants through Islamic texts and traditions.

### **1.11. Islamic traditions of protection**

Over 600 million Muslims live in countries where Islam is the official state religion (Stahnke and Blitt 2005:954). From a legal perspective this means that Islamic jurisprudence is enshrined in the constitutions of many Muslim majority countries as a key source for legislation.<sup>52</sup> Some commentators question the possibility of constructively employing Islam as a means to realise human rights in predominantly Muslim States arguing that there is a tension between secular international norms and Islamic law (Baderin 2005:30).<sup>53</sup> However, in the area of refugee rights I would argue that this is precisely what is needed in the Middle East: an exposition of modes of Islamic protection for forced migrants which is in keeping with the international protection regime and in some instances affords forced migrants even greater protection.

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<sup>52</sup> Further details on the constitutions of Muslim countries can be found at:  
<http://www.servat.unibe.ch/law/icl/index.html>

<sup>53</sup> The tensions that Baderin refers to evolve out of divergent views of the role of the individual and government in society. In the modern world of nation-states the discourse on rights organises the ways in which we conceptualise the law. The government as a representative body is subordinate to the demands of its citizens, whose rights they guarantee. For Hannah Arendt (1973), the conflation of state with nation meant that the newly formed entities that emerged from the ashes of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires necessitated the “unmixing of peoples”, creating residual stateless groups that did not belong to any nation-state. Consequently, “only nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions” (Arendt 1973:275). Thus for refugees we speak of the right to seek asylum; the right to education; the right to health provision and the right to work which are granted by the state on a case by case basis. In the case of Syria today, refugee status determination is carried out by the UNHCR on behalf of the Syrian government.

This alternative perspective on law posits that individuals should follow injunctions laid out in key religious texts, that is the Qur'an and *aḥadīth*, which command people to establish the prayer; observe the month of Ramadan; give alms and charity to those in need; respect the rights of parents and neighbours; respect the rights of orphans and so on. A leading contemporary Iranian philosopher, AbdolKarim Soroush (2000:62) notes that the language of religion (here we mean Islam):

is the language of duties, not rights [...which] imply respecting the rights of others at the expense of oneself. What is at issue here is not *my* rights which are to be respected by my neighbours, but *their* rights which I am supposed to respect. (emphasis original).

This is pivotal to understanding that in the case of Iraqi Muslim forced migrants in Syria, implicit within the mobilisation of cultural resources in the form of religious traditions and practices, is the idea of entitlement. Moreover, there are some powerfully emotive symbols within Islam which commend the notion of refugee protection. The process of displacement encompassing the triumvirate of flight, asylum and sanctuary are covered extensively in Islamic traditions - most notably in the Qur'an and *aḥadīth* literature. For refugees and those seeking asylum in majority Muslim countries, the re-imagining and mobilization of such traditions can potentially unlock the means for extended protection rights (Arnaout 1987, Elmadmad 1991, Muzaffar 2001, Manuty 2008, Shoukri 2011). Indeed, it has been suggested that within the Islamic tradition, asylum is a "moral and legal right" (Abd al-Rahim 2008:19).

For those interested in extending the protection space<sup>54</sup> available to forced migrants, the practices of the early community of Muslims conceivably provides a legitimate and fruitful source of protection mechanisms for refugees and those seeking asylum in the Arab and wider Muslim world. Matters pertaining to protection and assistance are referred to 396 times in the Qur'an; 170 in relation

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<sup>54</sup> This is a term coined by the UNHCR in response to the urban settlement patterns of many forced migrants today. Recognising that many urban refugees are self-settled, the UNHCR has adopted a rights-based approach to securing a conducive environment for the needs of refugees. Such rights would include freedom of movement and access to livelihoods, labour markets and key welfare services such as education and health (UNHCR, 2009:4-5).

to the needs of vulnerable people; 20 make specific reference to *hijra* (flight) and *amān* (asylum); 12 mention sanctuary; 68 verses refer to *zakāt* and charity; more than 100 other *aḥādīth* deal with persecution and oppression (Zaat 2007:6). Despite this, there had been little systematic *fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) on this under-researched issue and only recently has there emerged an awakening of academic interest in the field of refugee studies to explore ways in which refugee protection mechanisms can be bolstered through understanding Islamic traditions.<sup>55</sup>

The UNHCR recognising the value of Islamic traditions as a source of protection for those seeking asylum, particularly in countries with a predominantly Muslim population, has recently begun highlighting aspects of Islamic Law that correlate with the International protection regime. António Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (in Abou El-Wafa 2009:5) writes:

More than any other historical source, the Holy Qur'an along with the Sunnah and Hadith of the Prophet of Islam are a foundation of contemporary refugee law [...] The international community should value this 14-century-old tradition of generosity and hospitality and recognize its contributions to modern law.

## Conclusion

It is my contention that forced migrants are active social agents who develop a range of choices and strategies. My area of enquiry focuses on how Iraqi refugees are able to mobilise resources to adequate means to sustain their lives. In this chapter, I considered the possibility that Islamic traditions, networks and institutions may be pivotal in helping Iraqi refugees to do so.

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<sup>55</sup> Notable exceptions have been: Arafat Shoukri (2011) *Refugee Status in Islam*, which offers a thorough overview of the central Islamic traditions of *jiwā r* and *amān*. The UNHCR sponsored publication *Refugee Survey Quarterly* vol. 27(2) in 2008 was devoted completely to highlighting the protection of refugees under Islamic Law. This was followed up with a UNHCR sponsored publication in 2009 "The Right to Asylum between Islamic Shari'ah and International Refugee Law: A Comparative Study" Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4a9645646.html> [Accessed on 04 November 2009].



Given the particularity of the displacement of Iraqis to Syria, I propose that in trying to understand their experience in Damascus we must not lose sight of the fact that despite having crossed a border, Iraqi refugees find themselves in space which is largely familiar. This familiarity is itself grounded in the cumulative socio-cultural history of the stranger in the Muslim world as a welcome figure rather than a hostile entity. In addition, Islamic understandings of belonging are broader than the territorially bounded notions of nationalism, so that over hundreds of years in countries such as Syria a “local cosmopolitanism” (Zubaida 1999, Chatty 2010) has emerged allowing diverse communities to live alongside one another.

Drawing on the work of Thomas Tweed and Pierre Bourdieu, I propose that religion must be recognised as a social and cultural resource which enables the project of emplacement or home-making. To be a stranger one has to arrive in an already inhabited place. Hospitality is therefore an integral aspect of emplacement. I contend that hospitality or the practice of welcoming a stranger – something which was prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia and consolidated upon with the advent of Islam – should be recognized as a feature of a practical ethics. That is to say the practice of welcoming a stranger encourages the disposition to live ethically. In addition, the vast corpus of Islamic traditions pertaining to asylum and assistance to refugees supports this proposition and provides an alternative framework of protection which forcibly displaced people can lay claim to.

Tweed’s approach, in which religion is formulated as crossing and dwelling, offers much for researchers interested in intersections of migration and religion. However, his reluctance to address the issue of constraint in relation to the project of “home-making” must be addressed directly. In the first instance, refugees are marked by constraint throughout their migratory experience. Second, the state plays a fundamental role in the delineation and demarcation of boundaries under which religion is understood and acted upon in society. In short, religious actors are constrained by the state. For religiously oriented Iraqi refugees there is a double bind: they are constrained as forcibly displaced people whose access to material resources is limited by the state and they are

constrained as religious actors in Ba'thist Syria. This issue is more closely explored in Chapter Five.

There are always struggles over the meaning and employment of resources. Key actors with whom refugees are engaged in a competitive struggle are the state, international agencies such as the UNHCR, and the guardians or gatekeepers of religious traditions. To better understand the nature of this struggle, the players involved and the conditions under which religious resources come to be mobilised, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital are invaluable.

In particular, Bourdieu's concept of habitus as embodied cultural capital is of significance when considering decision-making capabilities of Iraqi refugees in Damascus. I suggest that the religiously oriented cultural capital which Iraqi refugees possess is embodied as religious habitus. This assists Iraqi refugees in navigating social space in Damascus such that the city is not a foreign space in which they are unwelcome. Here refugees engage in a strategy of position-taking in relation to other religious actors, humanitarian agencies and the state. It is this understanding of the "relational-self" that I argue is at the heart of religious belief and practice.

For Bourdieu, social actors no longer inhabit and engage with struggles in the structured spaces which comprise society once they die. In a sense, they are out of the game. However, the materialist emphasis in Bourdieu's theory of practice necessarily occludes a relationship which is hugely significant to those who self-identify as "believers". Religiously oriented individuals - to continue with the analogy of sports which Bourdieu is fond of - are playing past the whistle and envisage extra time. As such, relationships are configured with God in mind. Bourdieu neglects the fact that for believers, God very much is in the game.

## Chapter Two

### Research Methodology: Locating Religion in the Lives of Forced Migrants

*“And to Allah belong the East and the West, and whithersoever you turn, there is Allah's Countenance. For Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing.”*<sup>56</sup>

*Abu Huraira reported that the Messenger of Allah said: “[...] the [whole] earth has been made for me clean and a place of worship”.*<sup>57</sup>

### Introduction

How does a researcher investigating aspects of religious belief and practice develop a method which allows participants to elaborate on the relationship between their beliefs and actions without falling back on meta-narratives of religion? How does one set out to locate the role of religion in the lives of forced migrants? The approach I adopted for this task lay quite simply within the question itself. First, by *locating* religion, I opened up the possibility of exploring how religion manifested itself spatially and how it is inscribed in the spatial practices of Iraqi forced migrants.<sup>58</sup> Secondly, by centring my research on the life experiences of Iraqi forced migrants in Damascus I had committed myself to not only examining their current situation but also tracing the genesis and structuring of their religious beliefs and practices over the course of their lives. This research project is therefore both a synchronic and diachronic exploration of religion in the lives of Iraqi refugees.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the definition of what constitutes religion and how best to understand religious practice and belief is a matter of intense debate. In this chapter, I suggest that theories of religions, despite providing a plausible hermeneutic of religion, fail to offer a heuristic of religion. In other words, although we learn from innumerable theories what possibly can be made of religious traditions we rarely learn what can be made *from* religious traditions. Thomas Tweed's (2006) stipulative definition offers a way forward; by positing religion as both “dwelling” and “crossing”, his definition opens avenues for

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<sup>56</sup> The Noble Qur'an 2:115

<sup>57</sup> Sahih Muslim Book 004, Number 1062

<sup>58</sup> Logan (2012:507) tells us that “spatial thinking is about where things are or where they happen, and it is especially about *where they are in relation to others*”. Thinking relationally is central to a Bourdieuan framewok and informs my own understanding of religion.

understanding the transformative potential of religion – that is to say the ways in which religious traditions can be mobilised anew. However, Tweed's theory of religion falls short in acknowledging the role of structures beyond the subjectivity of the individual. Here I have in mind the state and agencies such as the UNHCR in the case of refugee populations.<sup>59</sup>

I propose a two-fold analysis. First, a Bourdieuan framework is useful in understanding the logic of practices and beliefs of Iraqi forced migrants in Damascus. I draw attention to the strengths of employing such a framework in relation to how personal trajectories inform the struggle to take positions by social actors in relation to larger socio-political and cultural structures. Individual accounts relate life-stories in which respondents disclose their subjectivity and affect, so that my analysis also examines the representation of personal trajectories. This draws attention to a "lived experience of religion rather than one which privileges meta-narratives of religious institution and the state.

Second, contrary to Bourdieu, the struggle which social actors participate in is not only for the accumulation of capital for a stake in the wider field of power. Rather, the struggle which religiously-minded bodies partake in has the project of home-making in mind. Positioning myself between Tweed and Bourdieu, I contend that a holistic approach, which considers religion at micro, meso and macro levels, better enables us to understand the religious lives of refugee populations.

My study is based on in-depth qualitative interviews which allowed scope for episodic life stories while attending to historical moments in dialogue with individual transformation. In this sense, testimonies are the articulated experience of history told through memory. Any discussion on memory raises concerns about representativeness. In this chapter, I address these concerns and contend that the problematic of memory provides us with a useful heuristic device which serves to reveal the multiplicity of possibilities and meanings behind social actions. The accounts provided in this thesis arise out of the specific encounter between the participants and the researcher: this is an explicitly dialogical construct. The result is a set of life-stories filtered through

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<sup>59</sup> This is discussed at greater length in Chapter Six.

the interpretive lens of the approach I have developed in relation to religion in the lives of forcibly displaced people. As a researcher, I make purposive decisions as to which extracts should be included and which omitted, where to focus analysis and how to translate and transcribe. This is not to deny the agency of my respondents. Far from it; in fact, by drawing attention to the stories they tell, placing themselves at the heart of the action, respondents reveal the significance of a particular event in addition to their perception and interpretation of it. In doing so, they share insights into what religion means – and reveal key aspects of the process of forced migration from the agent's perspective.

Through attending to biographical details offered by the participant we can get a sense of the process of socialization: in this case the shaping of attitudes and dispositions towards religion. Indeed, by drawing Bourdieu away from religion as “institution” and towards religion as “disposition”, we can deflect one of the common criticisms levelled at Bourdieuan analysis: namely, the privileging of the researcher’s structural account over that of the participant’s lived experience, with little emphasis on agency (Martin 2000, Dillon 2001, Throop and Murphy 2002, Verter 2003). Here I work both with and against Bourdieu by seriously considering the narratives of my respondents.

I begin this chapter by situating myself in the research project and elaborating on how my own interests and experiences come to bear on the study. This is followed by a more extensive discussion on my methodological framework, outlining the ways in which key Bourdieuan terms are employed along with how I approach the narratives that resulted from interviews with participants. In the final part of the chapter, I offer a discussion of the methods utilized for data collection and analysis: including sampling; carrying out; translating and transcribing interviews; and coding of data. I also outline some of the difficulties of conducting research on a politically sensitive issue under the watchful eye of an authoritarian state. A key objective of this chapter is to therefore to expound upon the ethics involved in data gathering in the context of conducting research in Syria in relation to my status as a researcher.

To openly acknowledge the position of the researcher within the research is to recognize that the latter does not hold a privileged, omniscient view. Rather, recognizing the positionality of the researcher is indicative of the decision-making that permeates all research in the social sciences. Judgement calls are continuously made by the researcher about dilemmas associated with ethics and choice of language. Whenever one path is taken, it means another has been foregone. Such recognition points unambiguously to the partial and local dimension of knowledge production.

### **2.1. Locating myself within the research project**

It seems to me disingenuous to be embarking on a discussion of dispositions, beliefs and practices without considering my own. As Bourdieu (1999:608) asks of us: “How can we claim to engage in the scientific investigation of presuppositions if we do not work to gain knowledge [science] of our own presuppositions?” As social scientists we have to remain vigilant of the creative aspects of our work. The shift in the social sciences emphasizing greater reflexivity and drawing back the curtains to reveal the standpoint of the researcher is far from novel and has been well documented elsewhere in studies on migrant populations (Hoffman 1989, Aciman 1999, Nassari, 2007, Fatih 2012). Any research project carries with it an imprint of the researcher. This is particularly the case for a doctoral thesis. Why else would an aspiring researcher commit three to four years of his/her life, living under financial constraints, and often immersed alone in thought, if the research topic was not one that was of some significance?

No single factor propelled me to undertake this research. What is now clear to me is that addressing the social construction of the lives of refugees has in a sense allowed me to understand my own social world. It explains for me, for example, the dissonance between the practices and beliefs of my parents’ generation and that of mine. There is further differentiation between the practices of my siblings and I. In the following pages, I briefly attend to some auto-biographical details so that the reader can intimate a sense from where I am located in relation to the framing of the research project and its questions.

My grandparents were forcibly displaced in 1947 along what today is known as the Line of Control in Kashmir. Moving from Rajouri in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) to Pakistani Occupied Kashmir (POK), my paternal grandmother was widowed almost immediately: my grandfather was buried on the Line of Control, leaving her responsible for seven children, the youngest being my father and the eldest my uncle Mohammad Dīn then aged 16. Shortly after, my father's family and other members of their clan (including my maternal grandparents) settled in a village on the outskirts of Mirpur in POK.

The newly created state of Pakistan had very little capacity to house millions of forcibly displaced people who were crossing a new border with India. Those with the requisite know-how took the property of Hindus and Sikhs who had fled in the opposite direction. Others, such as my family, relied on the hospitality of the resident villagers whom they had never met before and belonged to different tribal<sup>60</sup> networks. These villagers organised at the level of the clan to welcome the newly displaced. In the case of my father's family, they were given a small house. Villagers provided flour and vegetables grown in their fields. My paternal grandmother supplemented this by finding work cleaning and helping in the homes of residents of Mirpur who would pay with lentils, flour and vegetables. Solidarity was made significantly easier on the basis of a shared culture, language and religion. With the construction of Mangla Dam (1961-67), the old town of Mirpur and its surrounding villages and settlements were submerged under water. Once again, my family was displaced. Most moved to a village settlement outside Mirpur: a fortunate few chanced the opportunity offered through migration agencies to gain permits to come and work in Britain; among them was my father who arrived in Britain aged 19 in 1964.

As a migrant labourer, my father undertook a number of low-paid jobs – first, at a laundry in West Ham where used clothes would be cleaned and moved on for re-sale elsewhere, then to Joseph Rank's flour mill at Pontoon dock, and later cleaning barges and ships which docked at the nearby Tate and Lyle sugar

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<sup>60</sup> I recognise the contentious nature of the term 'tribe', acknowledging its emergence from the field of Social Anthropology at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, social anthropologists were in the paid service of colonial administrations which reflected upon strategies of control over colonised populations. However, given that the term is used widely in the literature and by my participants, the term tribe or tribal is used exclusively in this thesis to denote affiliation to patrilineal clan networks.

factory. In 1971, he returned to POK and married my mother. With marriage and the birth of my eldest sister, the hand of Providence guided my father to work at the Ford Motor Company assembly plant in Dagenham. This was his longest period of continuous employment where he remained until being made redundant in 1983. By late 1973, my mother and eldest sister had joined my father who was living in Canning Town, sharing a house with his brothers. I was born in 1975.

## **2.2. A sacracialized identity**

Growing up in Newham, I was quickly made aware that race mattered and that I was “foreign”. Until the age of five, I barely spoke a word of English. We didn’t own a television and the only language heard within the home at that time was Pahari.<sup>61</sup> The only sustained contact I had with English people was at primary school where the playground was a battlefield. Hearing the word “paki” often preceded by an expletive or choice adjective was commonplace. Unsurprisingly, Black and Asian lads would band together finding safety in numbers. Playground scraps triggered by racist remarks were an every day occurrence. As we moved onto secondary school the race divide seemed all the more clearer. Not many of my black and Asian friends or cousins wanted to go to Brampton Manor Secondary School in the South of the borough; it was where the English kids would predominately go. Instead, the majority of my peers, cousins and friends from the Pakistani and Kashmiri community went to Langdon Comprehensive. Friendships formed with English lads at primary school dissipated as soon as I went to Langdon Comprehensive and they moved on to Brampton Manor. Soon, I would see those same friends in a group with other English lads, some of whom were known for being racist. Walking past, we would avert our gaze, barely recognizing the other was there.

A few years earlier, Asian youths had begun to assert themselves. Tired of the logic of having to move around town in numbers for fear of being “bashed”, a group of Asian youths had taken on local racists. The Newham Seven as they came to be known, with their slogan of “self defence is no offence”, gave the

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<sup>61</sup> Pahari is the primary language spoken in the lower Himalayas and particularly in Southern provinces of Jammu and Kashmir (both sides of the Line of Control). The proximity and dominance of Punjabi culture and language means that many consider it a dialect of Punjabi.



Asian community in Newham a new-found confidence. This confidence had a more organised face in the guise of the Newham Monitoring Project, established in response to the growing number of violent and on occasion fatal hate crimes perpetrated against Asians.

The change was palpable. By the time I left secondary school, graffiti proclaiming the rise and glorification of the National Front, which I would pass by on the walk to school every day, had been painted over. Fights were less common. Asian shopkeepers on Green Street in Upton Park, including a couple of uncles, no longer had to shutter their shops early on a Saturday afternoon for fear of having their shop attacked by racist elements within the crowds that would come to support the local football team- West Ham United.

It was also around this time that Islam as an identity marker became more prominent in my life. Up until the late 1980s it had never occurred to me that I was anything other than “Pakistani” or “Asian”. Kashmiri identity in the Diaspora had been subsumed by the logic of partition which had created Pakistan and India. Travel to and from POK continues to be mediated through transport hubs in Pakistan. British census records listed us as Pakistanis. At school, Kashmiris continue to be bracketed with Pakistanis. Rivalry with Indians only revealed itself during times when Pakistan and India took to the cricket field. A mutually intelligible language meant that in London cultural products were shared across the divide of partition; we watched the same Bollywood films, shared music and food,<sup>62</sup> creating an “Asian” scene in opposition to the dominant white cultural scene for youth. This does not mean that Islam did not play a part in my life. It most certainly was an important part and an education also. I would spend time with older cousins and friends at the local mosque, looking up to the elder lads as role models. My siblings and I, like most of our peers, would attend Qur'an recital lessons after school. At home we were taught the manners of Muslim children. I also assumed that the same would be true for Sikh and Hindu friends.

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<sup>62</sup> I remember at my first week as an undergraduate seeing a poster put up by the university's Asian society inviting students for a “chai and samosa” gathering and wondering what West-Asian and East-Asian students would make of the exclusive appropriation of Asian identity by Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshi students.

In quick succession, a number of more global events impacted on self-constructed notions of identity. The Rushdie affair in 1989, the Gulf War of 1991, the dispute over the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, and the massacre at Srebrenica in 1995 all raised questions on identity and the dangers and risks of assimilation. In addition, changes in global migration flows meant that in Newham Muslims were no longer predominately Kashmiri, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Gujarati, but also increasingly Somali, Nigerian, Turk and Kurd among others. I realized, particularly in religious spaces, that there was an affinity that tied me to people who were not Pakistani, Indian or Bengali. With this came recognition of the differences and similarities of the various Islams we carried not only in our minds but in our bodies. This was most evident, for instance, in the slight differences of the prayer ritual. This in turn engendered an impulse to know and learn a more “authentic Islam”. By the time I was 17 I was regularly attending study circles at mosques and seminars given at the local further education college and gatherings at friends’ homes where I received greater exposure to texts by Salafist scholars such as Shaykh Nasir al-Dīn al-Albāni and Shaykh abd al-‘Azīz bin Bāz.

Of course, I write of the shift from a racialized identity to identifying with a religious identity or a “sacracialized”<sup>63</sup> identity with the benefit of hindsight and as someone who has an interest in matters pertaining to identity. On paper it seems a clearly demarcated shift; from before to after. The reality is considerably more complex and nuanced. Diasporic identities are characterised by heterogeneity (Hall 1996) and no doubt the religious dimension of my identity had been present during my childhood also, but less explicitly so.<sup>64</sup> Closer to home, my youngest brother, a full 10 years younger than I, was barely cognizant of the above mentioned global events while growing up. Racist discourses today, although as pernicious as ever, are more tied in with ideas and debates on cultural belonging, immigration and criminality.

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<sup>63</sup> A term I coin for the process of bringing sacred meanings to bear upon identities which have been differentiated on the basis of race.

<sup>64</sup> Stuart Hall (1996:444) problematizes the notion of a common black experience in Britain which is blind to the diversity of subjectivities within the Black Diaspora in Britain. He gives the example of how gay and lesbian identities are negotiated and represented in Black communities.

### 2.3. Thinking about refuge in religion

A decade later, my travels as an English Language teacher had afforded me the opportunity to live and work in Cairo. As had been the case in previous teaching stints in Istanbul and Rabat, I did not experience a “culture shock”. Everything seemed reasonably familiar. Students would often remark “But, you're not really British; you're more like us.” At the time, I put this down to my commitment to wanting to learn the local language and to cultural sensitivity. To some extent, this shared knowledge, understanding and know-how has given me partial insider-perspectives on the lives of my respondents for this project.

In Cairo, through a friend who was working with Sudanese refugees, I came to learn of the difficulties that they faced. The ambivalence of the state and the discordant behaviour of the UNHCR regarding their claims for refugee status had prompted some from within the refugee community to protest outside a large mosque in a middle class suburb of Cairo. Within a short time, rumours of lewd and drunken behaviour of the refugees were circulating among resident Cairenes. A moral panic concerning the refugees had been constructed. Some complained of being on the receiving end of racist taunts. All this seemed far removed from the stories that my grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts had told me of their experience of displacement. Moreover, the figure of the Prophet as a *Muhājir* (migrant) and the ideal of hospitality in Muslim traditions were ones that I was familiar with. So, why was there so much antagonism towards a vulnerable refugee population?

On my return to England I wrote an MA thesis investigating the mosque as a site of inclusion for Somali refugees in London (Zaman 2007). A key finding was that through coming into contact with other Muslim communities there has been a notable shift away from a syncretic, local practice of Islam particular to Somalis to a more essentialized interpretation of Islamic practices which caters to the needs of a congregation made up of adherents from across the globe. This has implications for how Somali refugees in London construct identity, drawing on multiple associations which extend beyond the bounds of race and ethnicity. Similarly, Grillo (2004:866) suggests a “transethnicisation” of Muslims living in cosmopolitan centres such as London creating “a kind of ‘supertribal’

category...an imagined coalescence of peoples of different origin and background under the heading 'Muslim'" (ibid). Extending this analysis to Iraqi refugees living in Damascus seemed to me problematic in that the experiences I have had as a Muslim living in London have themselves taken place within a context of multiculturalism and as a racialized other, particular to the politics of Britain in the late twentieth century.

Research for the MA thesis alerted me to the difficulties of researching religion. Had I only affirmed my own experiences? If so, was I not in danger of following a circuitous argument which conveniently brought me to the answers I had arguably been looking for? Reflecting on these concerns, I arrived at the conclusion that applying a narrative perspective to research on religion and migration would help tease out ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes – especially in relation to representations of religious identity that respondents may wish to relate for the occasion of an interview. In addition, it served to remind me that the researcher is always present in the research, however much the text of the thesis may veil this fact. For this reason, throughout this thesis, I draw attention to my presence and perspective; reflecting on my interpretation of my participant's testimonies. I also realised that spatial understandings and practices ought not to be disregarded in favour of data produced over the course of an interview. Finally, restricting the MA thesis to ideas of inclusion and exclusion weighted the study towards exploring religion primarily as a form of social capital. While there is much to be gained from this, such a narrow conceptualisation restricted religion to the confines of institutions - in particular, the mosque - and overlooked the possibility that religion can be practised spatially in what can be perceived as more secular spaces. In what follows, I offer a consideration of how best to address these issues.

#### **2.4. Agency within a bourdieuan framework**

How does one avoid normative and positivist readings of respondents' attitudes towards religion? To what extent are the structures of religion responsible for the way people behave? Are we as Rousseau (2008 [1762]:14) would have it "born free" but "everywhere [...] in chains"? Or is there a measure of volition in how we act? Arguments about structure and agency or choice and constraint

have characterised debates in the social sciences since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of this disciplinary area. To which (structure or agency) we attribute as being responsible for the making of the social world is answered by the twin methodological stances of subjectivism and objectivism. For Bourdieu (1990:25), it is this “opposition that artificially divides social science [and is] the most fundamental and [...] ruinous”.

To overcome this dichotomy, Bourdieu proposes a theory of practice in which theoretical constructs<sup>65</sup> such as habitus, field, capital and strategy mediate to allow for an inter-play - or even integration - of structure and agency. When speaking of a habitus there are three distinct aspects to consider: first, the conditions under which it was formed; second the immediate context of action; and lastly, the practice which results. Stated definitively, my analysis of Iraqi refugees in this study takes into account personal history, current circumstances (economic and social) and the strategies Iraqi forced migrants employ. In addition, the notion of field, and the struggle or the jockeying for positions which takes place particularly in the humanitarian field, allows us to consider and explore the ways in which relations of power across Damascus colour and directly impact on the lives of Iraqi refugees.

With strong echoes of Marx, Bourdieu opines that an integral function of religion is to justify and sanction social difference while simultaneously veiling the economic inequality that lies at the heart of the human condition. This process he labels “consecration” (Bourdieu 1991:14). It is through the ability to consecrate, that structures of social space<sup>66</sup> shape perceptions of the world such that the world seems “natural”. For this reason, in agreement with Bourdieu, I contend it will not suffice to seek an understanding of the social world by adopting an analysis of subjectivity alone:

No doubt agents do have an active apprehension of the world. No doubt they do construct their vision of the world. But this construction is carried out under structural constraints. One may even explain in sociological

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<sup>65</sup> Bourdieu’s theoretical constructs, particularly their usefulness in the study of religion, have been laid out at greater length and detail in Chapter 2. Here, I will concern myself to the oft-repeated claim that Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice denies agency.

<sup>66</sup> These may be related to matters of material advantage or disadvantage or with gender.

terms what appears to be a universal property of human experience, namely, the fact that the familiar world tends to be 'taken for granted,' perceived as natural. If the social world tends to be perceived as evident and to be grasped [...] in a doxic modality [...] this is because the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of that world (Bourdieu 1989:18).

As we saw in the previous chapter, Bourdieu's institutional reading of religion is one borne out of a particular European historical experience with religion. Consequently, religion is deemed as anachronistic; with the real struggle for power centred on the state. Steven Engler (2003) provides an interesting adjunct to the ongoing discussion on the utility of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. He questions whether Bourdieu's insistence on the state being "the primary agent of consecration" (Engler 2003:450) occludes particular characteristics of late-modernity, most notably the processes of globalization wherein the modern nation-state is being challenged by alternative ideas of belonging, collective identities and means of organisation (Barber 1992, Beck 1992). Such processes denude the effectiveness of the state in carrying out its function as agent of consecration as ever greater numbers of people confronted with the precariousness and insecurity brought about through exposure to dominant globalizing trends are pushed further to the margins of the field of power in which the state has the greatest stake (Engler 2003:455). I argue it is in contexts such as these that religion emerges as one of a number of alternative agents of consecration.

Focusing on the experiential and episodes from life stories elicited through in-depth interviews, I draw attention to the efficacy of religion as an agent of consecration. It is the refraction of the social in particular individual minds and bodies that reveals how the world is internalized and perceived (Lahire 2003). Given that habitus is the centre-piece of a Bourdieuan framework, I ask: how does biographical detail and all the myriad experiences that comprise the process of socialisation (some contradictory, others complementary) jostle for position and result in an individual having a particular disposition? It is here that

despite Bourdieu's assertions to the contrary, narrative analysis can play a key role in research on religion and social agency.

## **2.5. Interviewing and narrative**

### **2.5a. Positioning the interviewer and interviewee**

The specificity of any thesis which mobilises testimony lies in its character as a perspective (that of respondents) filtered through another perspective (that of the analyst) or what Bourdieu (1999:625) calls being "a point of view on a point of view." My thesis is a collection of narratives – variations on a theme grouped together, snipped here, tucked into wider arguments there, interlaced with my own observations and thoughts. It becomes not so much a bricolage but a "metastory about what happened [...] editing and reshaping what was told and [turned] into a hybrid story" (Riessman1993:13). To this, we can add an additional point of view- the reader. Readers are not in the driving seat as the researcher is: while my eye, mind and pen may have been trained attentively on the bumpy road that is the doctoral thesis, the reader is at leisure to cast sideway glances and notice things which may have gone unnoticed by the researcher. Historical contingencies are highlighted in addition to alternative standpoints; where does gender, class, ethnicity or the generation divide fit in? The reader asks.

I am not only inscribed into the research by virtue of having a perspective but through the "analyst's intrusion" (Bourdieu 1999:608) which extends to the very first point of contact between the researcher and his respondents. How I presented myself and my research coloured the perception my participants held of what they understood the purpose and possible outcomes of my project to be. Thus the interview must be conducted so that the particular situation of an interview with a researcher, "make[s] sense" for the participant (Bourdieu 1999:613). By offsetting and minimizing the social distance between interviewer and interviewee, we are able to reduce the symbolic violence inherent in the relationship; helping "to overcome the obstacles linked to differences of social situation – in particular, the fear of patronizing class attitudes which, when the sociologist is perceived as socially superior, is often added to the very general, if not universal, fear of being turned into an object" (Bourdieu 1999:612). The

issue of intrusion was one that came up time and again over the course of my fieldwork. Later in this chapter I provide examples to illustrate how I attempted to reduce the social distance between my participants and myself, and also occasions on which interviews were abandoned because I believed they failed to “make sense” for participants. The approach I took during the field work phase – which can be extended to the production of this thesis as a whole – is that the research process is imbued throughout with the spirit of partnership and is a “collaborative, dialogic, jointly constructed affair” (Dudley 1998:165).

### 2.5b. The two-way street of memory

Although experience figures prominently in Bourdieu’s formulations of habitus, in particular the conditions under which it was formed, he fails to address the problematic of memory. One oft-cited definition of habitus is as “the past surviving into the present” (Bourdieu 1977:82), but why not turn this on its head and ask if the present re-imagines the past? If, as Bourdieu (1999:612-613) insists, the interview is an integral tool for sociologists to understand habitus, then surely we ought to consider more carefully the memories of participants and the construction thereof. Memory offers representations of the past. The post-modern trend of problematising grand-narratives opened the door to cultural theorists and historians to explore subjective narratives constructed through mining the “partial” and “local” sightings afforded by memory (Radstone 2000:84). Developments in the field of psychoanalysis questioned the temporal nature of memory whereby it is revised to conform to “fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of [personal] development” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988:111). Succinctly put, the here and now drives the production of the representation of the past as configured by memory.

It is useful to think here of the Roman God of Time and Transitions: Janus. In the English language we have the expression “Janus-faced” to mean two-faced or sometimes hypocritical.<sup>67</sup> An alternative meaning is to have contrasting aspects. The etymology of the expression lies in Roman representations of the God which depicted him to be facing forward (in time) and backwards (in time).

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<sup>67</sup> The expression two-faced is also used in the Levantine Arabic dialect. Syria was not merely on the periphery of the Roman Empire, but even had a Roman Emperor who was from the Hauran region of Syria.



Given this understanding of Time, the present becomes the site of contestation and contradiction as expectations of the future (where we hope to be; who we hope to be; and what we hope to be doing) shape and mould our memories of the past in order to attain coherency over our lives.

In this sense, no study of memory can be strictly labelled a study of “pure experience” or “pure events” (Kuhn 2000:186); rather once articulated, memory is subject to revision. As such, it actively makes meaning. Annette Kuhn (ibid.) argues that “memory work challenges assumptions about the authenticity of what is remembered, treating it not as ‘truth’ but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and its possibilities.” Yet one must be careful not to over-extrapolate and over-interpret, only to find oneself in a Dante-esque hermeneutic circle of hell. Memory work can be a fraught endeavour, as it raises the spectre of calling into question the testimonies of vulnerable people who in the case of Iraqi refugees have undergone profound experiences of displacement. For many participants, the decision to take flight was a difficult one to undertake risking their own personal safety and the safety of their families. For others, the journey to Damascus involved difficult and tense encounters with authority figures at the border in addition to the mistrust encountered at the UNHCR. Given this vulnerability of participants, in making private words public, do we not have an added responsibility to shield participants from “the dangers of misinterpretation”? (Bourdieu 1999:1)

In light of this brief discussion on memory and for the purposes of this thesis, the question we must then ask is: to what extent do institutions such as the state or the UNHCR manipulate the popular or collective memories of refugees? What does this mean for alternative readings and understandings of refugeehood? By demanding a particular narrative from displaced people in order to secure refugee status, are memories – and by extension experience-centred narratives – on their own, sufficient to understand the religious practices and dispositions of refugees?

I contend that much can be learned from the experience-centred narratives of Iraqi refugees as they shed light on formation and transformation of habitus. In

chapters three and four, I draw on testimonies of Iraqi refugees and juxtapose their representations of the past against official histories. In doing so, I remind readers that unlike Richard Brautigan's *Sombrero fallout*,<sup>68</sup> "stories don't fall from the sky (or emerge from the innermost 'self'); they are composed and received in contexts- interactional, historical, institutional and discursive – to name a few" (Riessman 2008:105).

### 2.5c. Add-an-adjective narrative

Finally, a word on narratives and stories; stories demand protagonists and specific conditions. They are widely expected to reach a resolution or perhaps leave you wanting more – a cliff-hanger to be continued with the promise of a resolution. They tend to be chronological: beginning, middle and end. Stories contingent on lived experience are mediated through memory. Yet memories are implacably untidy. Our memories merge with other people's and institutions' tellings of past events so that the lines between my memory and others' memories become blurred. There are some memories which are seared into the mind more than others. Memories associate with other images, smells and sounds, collapsing time and space, and can happen upon us quite unexpectedly.<sup>69</sup>

However, over the course of an interview, respondents rarely relate tightly bounded stories one after the other. Instead, there are quotidian narratives as well as hypothetical narratives which litter the interview. Here, the insider-outsider dichotomy reveals itself once more. For many participants, I was an outsider and that required explanations and clarifications on their part. Participants would often give details of daily occurrences during the time of sanctions in response to the question of "can you describe what life was like during the sanctions?" They knew that as a London born and based researcher, I have what I myself would describe as "a charmed life". I have had no

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<sup>68</sup> A novel combining two interrelated stories: one concerns the story of a neurotic writer whose Japanese girlfriend has just left him. The other story begins the novel with a sombrero falling unexpectedly out of the sky and is the attempt by the writer to start a novel. The aborted start to the novel is thrown into a waste paper bin where it takes a life of its own.

<sup>69</sup> Here, I am reminded of Marcel Proust's incident of the petite Madeleine in *Remembrance of things past*. His mother brings him a slice of cake whose smell transports him back in time to Combray and a childhood memory of having the cake dipped in tea with his Aunt Leone. A past dormant and suddenly awoken; so that for the protagonist it "all sprang into being, town and garden alike, from my cup of tea!" (Proust 2009:33).

experience of living under a regime such as the Iraqi Ba’thist regime. Recognizing this, respondents would relate habitual narratives rather than specific stories. These are also safer representations, particularly for those with whom I had not been able to foster a sufficiently strong relationship. This was also indicative of the power relations within the interview itself. My participants were educating me. In part this is attributable to the role of the dutiful researcher showing deference to his elders as expected. In addition, it can be attributed to my framing of the project as being categorically a doctoral thesis which would help me on the path of becoming an academic: I wasn't an *ustadh* (professor) yet.

These problems also illustrate narrative as testimony in distinction to hegemonic discourses or master-narratives.<sup>70</sup> This was how events in Iraq were, lest it be forgotten. Participants situated themselves between competing master-narratives to relate to me what they considered normative experience. Bamberg (2004:360), echoing the Bourdieuan interplay between habitus and field, contends that master narratives frame “sequences of actions and events as routines and as such have a tendency to “normalize” and “naturalize” – with the consequence that the more we as subjects become engaged in these routines, the more we become subjected to them.” As such, the agency of social actors is without doubt constrained by master-narratives. However, where one finds constraint, one will surely find resistance. Iraqi refugees positioned themselves in relation to hegemonic accounts producing counter-narratives<sup>71</sup> employing components from within the reference frame provided by master narratives (Bamberg 2004:363). This was their attempt to be written into history; aware that journal articles would be produced and a thesis written as well as presentations given at conferences. The following section considers how one such counter-narrative is constructed.

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<sup>70</sup> A master-narrative is a narrative which “serves as a blueprint for all stories; they become the vehicle through which we comprehend not only the stories of others, but critically of ourselves (Andrews 2004:1).

<sup>71</sup> Here I take Molly Andrew’s (2004:1) definition of counter narratives to be “stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives.”

## 2.6. Persecution narratives

A leading scholar in the field of narrative studies once remarked that it is the individual rather than the world or nature that tells stories (Riessman 1993:2). Is it facile to point to the existence of the state and other institutions; do they not also tell stories and construct narratives? More importantly, do they not shape the stories individuals tell? As we saw in the discussion above, narratives do reveal how social agents apprehend the world and add valuable insights into how agents wish to be perceived, but they fall short of unmasking the presuppositions on which the telling of the stories are constructed (Bourdieu 1999).

As researchers of the social world, and in particular the processes of forced migration, we need to move beyond solely looking at “how protagonists interpret things” (Bruner 1990:51) and take into account spatial understandings and practices of agents in addition to the presuppositions which structure their accounts. Refugees are continually asked to produce and reproduce narratives of past experiences by state agencies, NGOs, international humanitarian agencies and researchers. Often, the focus is on the triggers of displacement. This focus on past experience contributes towards the creation of what I call a “persecution narrative”. This lends itself to a “performative dimension” that allows humanitarian actors to identify “bona-fide” refugees (Malkki 1996:384).

The persecution narrative often eclipses present experiences. This can have a devastating impact on the well-being of refugees who – when a durable solution is not available – find they are forgotten in a protracted refugee crisis. The experience of displacement is Janus-faced; it is marked by contradictions, paradoxes and ambiguities. It is not only about loss but also about emplacement or making place (Camino & Krulfeld 1994, Hammond 2004, Turton 2005). The key word here is “place”. Thinking of space and place *relationally* (Massey 1991, Bourdieu 1998) enabled me to triangulate the narratives of Iraqi refugees with their positions in social space in relation to institutional actors, notably the state and the UNHCR.

Participants' focus on *tawfīn* (third country resettlement) as being the sole durable solution means that many had not faced up to the prospect of staying in Syria for a lengthy perhaps undetermined time. It also draws attention to the "presuppositions" that structure the social space within which refugees are situated. What do the terms "third country re-settlement", "return", and "local integration" mean for refugees on the one hand, and researchers and institutional actors on the other? Hegemonic or master narratives are not restricted to those produced by the state but include other institutions, most notably in this case the UNHCR. Religious discourses also sit in tension with those of the state. Yet these master narratives are not produced and reproduced in a vacuum but stand alongside and in distinction to scripts which operate at meso-levels, in particular the family, helping contribute to structuring the perceptions of individuals as they make sense of their social positioning. Nassari (2007:46) maintains that we ought not to overlook the hegemonic efficacy of collective and communal scripts as they are "entwined" into personal dispositions and attitudes. What became abundantly clear over the course of my fieldwork was that there was a gritty determination and resolve of all participants to tell their "persecution narrative".

The most clearly bounded segments of my interviews came unsurprisingly at points during the interview, where participants related their experience of persecution.<sup>72</sup> The lapse of time and the intervening repeated tellings had made the events in Iraq more tellable (and for the researcher) seductively interesting to listen to. Some participants had less cultural capital and know-how to deal with institutional actors such as the UNHCR. The following example perhaps best illustrates this. Bassam is a tailor in his early forties. His family had moved to Baghdad from the South of the country half a century earlier. They had never owned property in Baghdad. At the age of 18 he was conscripted into the army. I had asked him why he had chosen to live in the Sayyida Zayneb district of

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<sup>72</sup> Labov (1972:360) posits that a narrative is characterised by having "a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered." For Labov a complete narrative is one that contains six formal properties: 1. Abstract – a summary of the event. 2. Orientation – providing the listener with details of place, time, situation and participants involved in the story. 3. Complication – the sequencing of events. 4. Evaluation clauses – the significance of the event for the narrator. 5. Resolution - what finally happened. 6. Coda – returning the story to the present (Labov 1972).

Damascus, known for hosting large numbers of Iraqi refugees. He told me his choice was primarily based on the fact that there were lots of Iraqis living in the area and because “people talk to one another about their worries; the particulars of their lives and what makes them suffer.” Unprompted, he then gave a short account of the generalised fear of living through a sectarian conflict, painting a morbid account of what had happened to neighbours and the impact this had on him. Later in the interview, I asked him what contact he had had with the UNHCR. He told me:

Bassam: I didn't know a thing about them, even when I first got here. Some people [in the neighbourhood] told me you have to register, so we registered. They [UNHCR] gave us some forms and told us to fill them in. Now, you have people who are lying so that they can get out [of Syria] because they know what to do to get out. But we tell the truth and facts and if you were to ask me a year later, I'll tell you the same story: I don't know how to say something that didn't happen. They told us to go and register with the UNHCR, and we went and we haven't heard a single thing from them [UNHCR] since.

Here, he reveals that neighbours had signposted him to the UNHCR. His earlier account of the pervasive fear of persecution, which was quite possibly drawn from personal experience and the stories he had heard from neighbours in Sayyida Zayneb, reinforcing his account, did not tally with the requirements of the UNHCR which looks to elicit *individual* accounts of persecution. Those aware of UNHCR requirements tailor their stories to fit the “persecution narrative” that it demands of the refugees. Inconsistencies which arise through telling of events contingent on memory do not necessarily indicate that the truth is not being told. Yet, the UNHCR acting as policeman and indeed employing the methods of police, cultivate “a culture of disbelief” (Marfleet 2006:233) to discredit the accounts of refugees. For Bassam, the “truth and facts” were what compelled him to seek refuge in Syria. Why is it not sufficient for the UNHCR? He asks.

Other participants, notably the Palestinian-Iraqi community, were more meticulous in detailing dates and names of friends, neighbours and relatives who had been killed. This suggested to me that a connectedness to the wider Palestinian Diaspora and an awareness of the importance of testimony in challenging dominant narratives was part of their cultural capital. The

experience and memory of displacement from Palestine served notice to Palestinian-Iraqis of the importance of recording testimony. Indeed, this was partly why the Palestinian-Iraqi Community Association in Mukhayim al-Yarmouk consented to giving me access to participants. One respondent, Abu Fu'ad, was particularly keen on relating his life story which amounted to over eight hours of recorded interview material. Other interviewees presented the warning notes which threatened them with death if they did not vacate their properties. Similarly, Iraqi refugees with a university education presented more coherent narratives that conformed to UNHCR expectations of what a persecution narrative ought to be. One respondent, Farouk, presented me with photographic documentary evidence of the physical abuse his son had suffered at the hands of a kidnap gang.

The telling of these stories, though not central to my thesis, allowed my participants to “make sense” of the interview. Some interactions with resident foreigners from the Global North can be viewed as a means to increase the overall composition of capital. Contacting refugees with the intention to have a meeting with them immediately alerts participants to the presence of an outsider. Immediately, some have expectations of what this meeting could entail: a British researcher interested in meeting them to discuss their situation necessarily creates expectations. Other participants are keen to help as it provides them a break from the monotony of daily routine. On the other side of the coin, researchers make assumptions about their research project and its outcomes for participants, particularly the relevance of the project to the lives of the participants. In my case, would refugees be interested in discussing religion? Would I be best served by steering the discussion away from issues of sectarianism? As Catherine Riessman observes (2005: 479) interviews can be “saturated with conflicting expectations and assumption.” The issue then becomes one where such an “intrusion” (Bourdieu 1999:608) becomes explicit. The task set before the researcher is to lessen the social distance between interviewee and interviewer.

## **2.7. Sampling and data collection**

During the course of this research project, a data set was gathered from ethnographic fieldwork and I met with 42 people in total in a formal context. I followed multiple paths in locating respondents to participate in the project. I used purposive sampling to select men and women who were: a) Displaced after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and b) Self-identified as belonging to a faith community as opposed to being agnostic or of no faith. Rather than employ a narrow legal definition of a refugee, I employed a broader conceptualisation of refugeehood which posits it as a process of becoming rather than strictly a state of being a refugee. For the purposes of this thesis 23 in-depth interviews with refugees and 5 interviews with faith-based refugee service providers were transcribed. The decision to do so stemmed from multiple factors. Primarily, the inclusion of additional interviews would have lent it a class and sectarian bias. Kamal Doraï (2010) has shown that spatial distribution of Iraqis in Damascus takes place along class lines. Middle-class Iraqi Sunnis tend to reside in the more affluent northern suburb of Qudsiyya. Iraqi Christians and Mandaean are heavily represented in Jaramana, which is also home to a significant Syrian Christian and Druze community. As such it is widely regarded as being a district where Muslim symbolism is less pervasive (notably the reduced visibility of the hijab and the easy availability of alcohol). Poorer Iraqis are found in Sayyida Zayneb, Mukhayim al-Yarmouk and on the peripheries of Damascus in Sednaya and Saqba. To avoid over-dependence on any one network resulting in a skewed set of responses, I employed multiple gatekeepers (Bloch 1999). Access to refugees was granted through a combination of snowball-sampling through my own personal network (10 interviews); a paid research assistant who located respondents in Sayyida Zayneb, and through three gatekeeper organisations, namely:

- Mḥabba: A local NGO established in 1967 and based in the heart of the Christian district of Bab Touma. It has been the local implementing partner for the International Catholic Migration Commission since 2004 and is a key provider of health services for Iraqi refugees in Damascus. Mḥabba is an arm of Jam'īya usrat al-lkhā' al-Sūrī (The Family Association of Syrian Fraternity) which has strong links with the Syrian



Orthodox Church<sup>73</sup>. Over a period of three months I was allowed to observe the day to day interaction of Mḥabba staff with Iraqi refugees. Four of the 27 interviews I conducted and transcribed were with participants I had met at Mḥabba.

- The Iraqi Student Project (ISP): A small volunteer-run initiative which offers an interim education to Iraqi refugees whose education had been disrupted by the conflict. The aim of the project is to provide students with access to scholarships in America where they can complete their undergraduate studies. Over a period of six months I volunteered at the ISP, teaching English and Drama. Five of the 27 interviews I conducted were with participants [both students and parents] I had met through my time at the ISP.
- The Rābeta Falastīniyi al-‘Iraq (Palestinian Iraqi Community Association): A refugee run, community based organisation for Palestinian-Iraqis<sup>74</sup> which grew out of a response to meet the needs of Palestinian-Iraqis stranded at the al-Tanf refugee camp located at the Iraqi-Syrian border in 2006. The organisation largely deals with residency difficulties experienced by Palestinian-Iraqis and arbitrates in disputes that arise between members of the community. In addition, it acts as a hub for signposting services, an assembly hall for marriages, a gathering place on religious festivities, and a cultural centre where seminars are given on religion and on the complexities and challenges of integration in Syria or further afield in Europe.<sup>75</sup> Throughout its history it has been involved in negotiations with both the UNHCR and the Syrian government on behalf

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<sup>73</sup> Author's interview with the Director of Jam'īya usrat al-Ikhā' al-Sūrī, Bab Touma, Damascus, 22 December 2010

<sup>74</sup> I use the label Palestinian-Iraqi to refer to Palestinians displaced by Zionists in 1948 who sought refuge in Iraq. It also includes all Palestinian refugees who found refuge in Iraq post 1948 including those displaced as a result of the 1967 war and those displaced from Kuwait following the first Gulf War in 1991. For the purposes of this thesis, they are treated as a fraction of Iraqi society. I have not labelled them as Iraqi Sunnis as they have a particular relationship to the Iraqi and Syrian states which they do not share with their co-religionists. For more on Palestinian-Iraqis refer to Zaman, T. (2011), "Lessons Learned: Palestinian Refugees from Baghdad to Damascus." *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 5(2) 263-275.

<sup>75</sup> Author's observations from October 2009 to March 2010

of Palestinian-Iraqis residing in Syria.<sup>76</sup> A total of eight interviews were carried out with participants I had met through the Rabeta Falastīniyi al-‘Iraq.

Of the 23 refugee respondents eight were female and 15 were male. Three interviewees were Orthodox Christians; one was Mandaean, four were Shi’i Muslims, 14 were Sunni Muslims and one person was of dual Sunni and Shi’i heritage. The three gate-keeping organisations were structured in very different ways. Taking each in turn, I will draw attention to some of the methodological opportunities and challenges they presented.

### 2.7a. Mḥabba

Gaining access to the Iraqi Christian community proved by far the most difficult challenge. Other foreign humanitarian workers had told me of the difficulty and reluctance of the local Church communities to work with them. Eventually a meeting with the Director of Jam’īya usrat al-Ikhā’ al-Sūrī (The Family Association of Syrian Fraternity), an organisation that works with Iraqi refugees, opened the door to Mḥabba. The advantage of directly approaching a welfare service provider was to be able to interview management figures who were directly involved in the day to day running of the organisation. The interviews, apart from providing me with a wealth of data on the structuring of the humanitarian field in Syria,<sup>77</sup> also created trust between me and the organisation.

However, Mḥabba was a Syrian organisation catering to the needs of Syrian society at large rather than a community organisation operated by refugees for refugees. As such, Iraqi refugees would attend at fixed times in the week for appointments with staff members. Outreach groups would also visit Iraqi refugees in their homes. This meant that the context in which I was introduced to Iraqi refugees was framed by staff at Mḥabba. Invariably, on conclusion of their meeting with the Mḥabba staff, Iraqi refugees would be ushered to the desk Mḥabba had assigned to me in a shared office where I would be

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<sup>76</sup> Author's conversation with the organisation's senior administrator, Mukhayim al-Yarmouk, Damascus, 30 December 2010

<sup>77</sup> A theme which is explored at greater length in Chapter Five

introduced as a British researcher interested in speaking to them. Introducing myself and my project, I would speak to possible respondents for five to 10 minutes outlining the aims and objectives of the project. I then gave the possible respondent my mobile telephone number and requested theirs, asking if it would be possible to contact them at a later date at their convenience. Many would nod politely, saying it would be a pleasure to do so. However, on calling them, they would politely refuse saying that it just wasn't possible and they wouldn't be at Mḥabba in the foreseeable future. It became increasingly clear to me that the context in which I was presenting my project left some ambiguity as to who I was and what I was asking of them.

To counter this difficulty, I took to sitting in the waiting area of the centre rather than at the desk. There, I would strike up every-day conversations with people visiting the centre – not all of whom were refugees. When introduced to refugees, I would find a quiet corner in the waiting area to properly introduce myself and the project, rather than do so from behind an imposing desk. This minor detail also helped signal that I was independent of Mḥabba or any other organisation. Having gained consent to the interview, I would ask if it was possible to conduct it immediately. Doing so ensured that the interview took place but also placed constraints on it: namely, the location of the interview and the duration. The interviews at Mḥabba lasted an hour on average. It also meant that there was little time in which to nurture a relationship with the participants. For refugees “trust” is a key issue, as it permeates each phase of the refugee experience (Hynes 2003). I was trusted by association. The staff at Mḥabba had vouched for me and given that Mḥabba enjoyed a high level of trust among Iraqi refugees of all faiths it was implicit they trusted me in my role as researcher.

#### 2.7b. Iraqi Student Project (ISP)

Within a month of arriving in Damascus, Ali Ali – a fellow researcher from UEL – and I had been alerted by another doctoral researcher leaving the field to the existence of a volunteer-run organisation providing educational support to Iraqi

students. Having met the co-founders<sup>78</sup> of ISP, both Ali and I were invited to teach the students. Unlike the participants I met through Mhabba, at the ISP I was afforded the luxury of time and of carefully negotiating relationships with participants. In the case of the students, friendships were formed but were also imbued with a degree of responsibility. For some students I had to break the news that they had been unsuccessful in attaining a scholarship; for others I had to make sure that their plane tickets had been purchased and that all their paperwork was in correct order before they departed. On the date of their departure to the United States, I saw them off at the airport. In the intervening months I played football, celebrated birthdays, spent afternoons in the park, organised excursions, and shared the *iftar* meal with their families during Ramadan in addition to fulfilling the role of teacher in the classroom. Such proximity to the students also meant that I was hesitant to ask the students themselves to be respondents. Engaging them in interviews risked reducing the relationship to a transaction; the symbolic violence of the gift (Bourdieu 1990a). Fortunately, some students helped me overcome this impasse by suggesting I interview them or, in two cases, their parents.

Where proximity had engendered anxiety, it had also helped reduce the social distance between the students, their parents and I. I was not only a researcher, but I was Tahir, who taught them colloquial expressions in English, played football and shared food and tastes in music with them. Interviews were conducted at their homes, over a number of sessions. One parent, Adnan, was a craftsman who worked with wood and mother of pearl to craft intricate jewellery boxes. Prior to interviewing him, he showed me around the market where he bought materials and sold his finished products. We also spent several afternoons where he taught me how to engrave the wood and explained the complexities and intricacies of the designs he worked with.

Investing time and effort in nurturing relationships with participants yielded longer interviews averaging two to three hours. The location of the interviews also drew my attention to the importance of spatial practices; in particular the gendered separation characteristic of many Muslim homes and the sacralisation

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<sup>78</sup>

More is said about ISP, both students and personnel, in Chapter Six.

of home. For instance, the breaking off mid-sentence when the call to prayer is announced to softly repeat the words of the Muezzin, or the turning down of the volume on the television would not have been evident had I been conducting the interviews in the insulated confines of an office space.

#### 2.7c. Al-Rābeta

As was the case with Mḥabba, an interview with the director of the organisation, himself from the Palestinian-Iraqi refugee community, helped convince him that my research project was worth participating in. From the perspective of the Rābeta, the outcomes of the research project would contribute to raising the profile of the predicament that Palestinian-Iraqis are faced with. Unlike Mḥabba, the Rābeta was used on a daily basis by the Palestinian-Iraqi community. It is a community of self-reliance; run by refugees for refugees.

A further distinction of great significance was that the Rābeta was a gender-segregated space. Men and women had specific times set aside in the day for activities. Women were usually allotted a time between two and five o'clock in the afternoon, during which men were not permitted to use the premises. Consequently, my ability to form working relationships with participants was skewed in favour of male participants. During the permitted hours, I was at liberty to drop into the centre and have informal chats and cups of tea with staff members and users of the Rābeta. Over time, I became a familiar face and frequent visitor to the Rābeta. Participants would volunteer themselves, asking me when I'd be ready to interview them.

However, for female participants, there was an altogether different dynamic. I had been invited by the lead women's organiser, Sara, to introduce myself before an afternoon yoga class the women had organised. I arrived at the centre and gave a short 15 minute presentation on introducing myself and my research project. I also made it explicitly clear that I was not affiliated to any organisation other than my university. This was followed by a brief question and answers session where the group were interested in hearing about my motivations for carrying out the research. One of the more elderly women, Umm Hatim, spoke up against the UNHCR practice of dispersing families:

Umm Hatim: Don't you miss your mother?

Tahir: Without doubt auntie. I try to call her every week.

Umm Hatim: And do you think she would be happy if you stayed away from her for an indefinite time?

Tahir: No, she wouldn't.

Umm Hatim: So what can I do? They take one son and put him in Norway, another in Sweden. I am here. Like your mother, I just want to be happy and see my children. No, we're scattered across the world.

Murmurs and nods of agreement rose and fell across the room. Sara asked if any of those present would be interested in speaking to me at length and there was the boisterous clamour of those in the room talking over one another deciding on what to do. A few days later, I received a call from Sara with a timetable for interviews with a group of 10 women who were prepared to talk to me. The following week, I arrived at the Rābeta at the appointed time for the interviews. Thus, unlike the interviews with male participants which were afforded the luxury of being arranged organically and in their own time, the context in which the interviews were arranged was more mechanistic. This is reflected quite clearly in the length of the interviews with male and female participants. The interviews with male participants had a median length of approximately three hours whereas the interviews with female participants tended towards one hour duration.

During the course of the interviews one of the participants mentioned her nephew by name – a name I recognized – and it occurred to me that the female participants were not only female users of the Rābeta. They were also the wives, daughters, sisters, mothers or aunts of the male participants.<sup>79</sup> However, the segregated context in which activities (including the interviews) are conducted at the Rābeta flowed into my own structures of thought and perception; to ask the female participants pointed questions about their relations to male participants at the time seemed to me a transgression of the gendered spatial practices of the Rābeta. Equally, in the presence of male participants I did not venture to ask them the names of wives, daughters or sisters. This brings us back full circle to our earlier discussion on the knowledge of my own presuppositions which structure the ways in which I locate myself in the world. The particular, gendered world-view of Islam contends that the female and the

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Further details are given on kin relations that permeate the Rābeta in Chapters Five and Six.

person of womanhood are intimately tied with notions of privacy and the sacred.<sup>80</sup> Having a practical understanding of this, I took it for granted that such questions need not be asked.

Of the 28 interviews I recorded and transcribed, 17 were made possible through the co-operation of the above-mentioned organisations. As gatekeepers, they were kind enough to leave the key under the mat so to speak and rarely intervened overtly and directly in the selection of participants. However, this was not the only experience I had contending with gatekeepers. In the following section I take the opportunity to discuss the complexities of conducting research under an authoritarian state – the gatekeeper par-excellence.

## **2.8. Conducting ethical research under a watchful eye**

The Syrian regime runs an authoritarian ship. Emergency laws which allowed security services to arrest and detain people indefinitely without charge were initially lifted as the “Arab Spring” reached Syria and the regime seemed in two minds as to how to deal with the emergent situation. In fact, mass arbitrary detention of activists and dissenting voices continues. For the duration of my time in the field, access to social networking sites and internet sites that ran contrary to the regime line were heavily restricted. In short, dissent in Syria is not tolerated. As well as officially employed security personnel, there are networks of civilian informers in each neighbourhood who regularly report to the security services. Internet communications are also monitored.<sup>81</sup> Foreign nationals without annual residency are required to either leave the country or pay a visit to the Department for Immigration and Passports on a monthly basis: this all adds to a pervading atmosphere of fear, anxiety and suspicion for carrying out research within the constraints set by a repressive police state.

Upon arrival, I met with a researcher at the French Institute for the Near East (IFPO) with who I had been in email contact prior to my departure. He arranged a meeting for me with the Director of the Institute. His secretary then submitted an application for a research permit for me as a visiting researcher at IFPO. In May 2010, I received the permit from the Syrian Ministry of Culture and kept a

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<sup>80</sup> This issue is discussed at further length in Chapter Six.

<sup>81</sup> See Human Rights Watch (2010) report *A Wasted Decade* for more details.

copy to hand whenever venturing out for the purposes of my research. Equipped with official acknowledgement of my presence as a researcher in Syria, I was able to speak more openly about my project. To counter low-level security - essentially involving neighbourhood watch schemes, where locals would inform to higher level security operatives of any mis-doings - I spoke honestly about my research project with neighbours, emphasising the idea of Syria as a hospitable refuge for forced migrants. Fortunately, framing my project as such met the narrative of the Syrian state itself in which Iraqi refugees are deemed guests.

Early into my stay in Syria, a fellow researcher from Sussex University examining Iraqi resettlement issues was deported. She was not given a reason, only told at the Department for Immigration and Passports when she went to renew her residency that she had 48 hours to leave the country. On a routine trip to Lebanon to attain an updated visa entry stamp in my passport, I was held at the border by immigration officials. An uncomfortable three hours elapsed before the issue was resolved. During that time, I was very much aware that the Syrian state could easily cut short my research project as I had envisaged it.

Although it was far from unusual for Iraqi refugees with the requisite cultural capital to engage and socialize with resident foreigners from post-industrialized countries, an Iraqi friend admitted he felt unsure about having open social relations with American UNHCR staff for fear that this may result in a visit from the security services. These fears were not unfounded, as he later received a visit. Later episodes of clicks heard on my mobile phone when receiving or making telephone calls, taken in accumulation with past experience, only served to heighten fears, anxiety and suspicions. Fortunately, none of my informants spoke of having received any unwanted attention from the state.

However, this is not to say that the fear of repercussions from the state did not colour the conversations I had with my participants. Iraq under Saddam Hussein employed a security apparatus not dissimilar to the Syrian regime. Decades of engagement with an authoritarian state had taught my participants to be mindful of what they say and who they say it to – including well-meaning foreign researchers. Early in my fieldwork I was alerted to the sensitivities and



challenges of discussing a subject as delicate and complex as religion and its relation to other fields, notably that of security. While I may have a nuanced understanding of the term “religion”, it does not necessarily follow that the term is interpreted similarly by my participants. For some, it may indeed be characterized by complexity and nuance. Yet for others, it may simply be shorthand for institutional religion.

The following extract from an interview conducted in the early stages of my fieldwork serves to illustrate both the intersection of the religious field with the security field and the dilemma that I faced. The interview was with Haidar, a dentist who works in a clinic in Sayyida Zayneb. We had moved very quickly into the discussion on life in Syria and Haidar had made it clear that Syria was “an excellent country”. When asked whether he ever felt like a stranger in Damascus. He replied: “Never, I am pleased with the Syrian government and the people.” Shortly after, I asked some questions pointedly on the subject of religion:

Tahir: Would you say that you've learned a lot more about your faith and your religious duties as a consequence of leaving Iraq?

Haidar: I've started praying a lot more, and reading the Qur'an a lot more. Al-Hamdulillah (all praise is to God). I hope that I'll be able to continue like this. I don't know if it's because I'm far from home that I'm doing this. Honestly, I can't say. I just hope I'll be able to continue.

Tahir: And the mosque where you [is interrupted]

Haidar: [interrupts] look Tahir - questions like this make me want to not answer. I have all the religious freedom that I could ask for. I pray where I want when I want. Nobody says anything. I can go to a *husayniyeh*<sup>82</sup> anytime. Nobody stops me.

Tahir: No, what I was going to ask is whether it's an important place for you, personally

Haidar: Tahir, I just use the place which is most practical for me. If I'm close by, I'll pray there. I'll pray at the mosque close to where I live and work. That's normal. Sometimes I might go to the shrine. Most of the time, I'll pray in my home or wherever is nearby.

Haidar's unprompted praise of the Syrian regime is indicative of the anxieties that vulnerable populations such as refugees carry with them. It comes with the knowledge that the state has the power to not renew or even rescind the temporary residency status that Iraqi refugees enjoy. The hospitality of the state

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<sup>82</sup>

A Shi'i Islamic Centre where devotions in addition to prayers are offered.

is *always* conditional and temporary. In the above extract, Haidar pre-empts what he thinks the question on the mosque is about revealing security concerns. “Nobody says anything [...] Nobody stops me” for Haidar is both evidence of the hospitality of the Syrian regime and a rebuke of the check-points which dominated the neighbourhoods of Baghdad. Any question which may potentially jeopardise the hospitality of the state induced hesitation and reluctance in Haidar; it made him not want to answer.

Despite Haidar consenting to a recorded interview with a foreign researcher, the anxiety provoked by the state caused him to continually signal for reassurance from me, calibrating his expectations and assumptions with mine to “make sense” of the interview. Early in the interview, he positioned me as both insider and outsider, drawing attention to the fact that we were both away from our homes and we are both Muslims. Elsewhere he referred to me as ‘*akhi*’ Tahir; we are brothers in faith. Significantly, he was aware that he was the one who was helping me in carrying out the study. In doing so, he twice reminded me that this would be beneficial for him. He told me:

Haidar: Your research is something that will be beneficial to me. You're an academic; you're Kashmiri, Muslim more than two thousand kilometres away from your country. You're talking to Iraqis here about the fundamentals of the Islamic faith and their experience of migration from Iraq. This is something that would be most beneficial for me. Being a son of Iraq, being a Muslim, then there's no doubt that I will give you help with the project you are working on.

As the interview came to a close and I reached to switch off the recording device which was propped up on a stool between us he jokingly asked “Is this going to the *mukhabarāt* (security services) then?” eliciting a final reassurance that the interview would not jeopardise the hospitality of the state. The interview with Haidar was a highly instructive experience for me as a researcher in the field. It compelled me to adopt an approach which did not launch straight into a discussion of religion and made me think more deliberately on how the question of religion is framed throughout the interview. Importantly, it made me consider extensively the ethical ramifications of conducting interviews with refugees. The giving and gaining of consent before a recorded interview does not necessarily equate with participants having fully understood what the interview means for

both the researcher and the respondent. Consent is continually negotiated throughout the interview itself. Similarly, reassurances given during the interview must be upheld by the researcher. As such, I have done my utmost to afford anonymity to my participants where requested. Names have been changed and in some cases not given; ages have been altered, along with other identifying information other than profession. The following section explores some of the difficulties that arose in accessing participants. I continue with the theme of conducting ethical research. In particular, I relate how in some cases through the mediation of gatekeepers the interview situation failed, to use Bourdieu's felicitous phrase, to "make sense" for participants.

## **2.9. Guardians and Gatekeepers**

Alongside official gatekeepers to community organisations, there is a more unofficial pooling of resources which arises through the cultivation of networks through fellow researchers. It is often noted that the PhD process can be a lonely experience. Advice is often given by supervisors to combat the "blues" of being a new researcher. Given the concerns and in some cases paranoia of conducting research in the social sciences in an intrusive and authoritarian state such as Syria, it was perhaps unsurprising that there was very little in the way of an organised structure which allowed researchers new to Syria to meet and exchange ideas.<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, birds of a feather undoubtedly flock together. In my case, a research colleague from UEL and close friend, Ali Ali, was also carrying out his doctoral research on the causes of displacement at the same time in Damascus. This naturally meant we would advise, encourage and motivate one another when faced with stumbling blocks. It also meant that we both paid care and attention not to overlap in our research given that we were both interested in the same constituency of Iraqi refugees. Striking a balance, we tended to avoid interviewing the same participants. Quite simply, it would have put strain on participants to relate their experiences over and again. However, we reciprocated in introducing one another to potential participants. I introduced Ali to the Palestinian-Iraqi community in Mukhayim al-Yarmouk. Ali introduced me to the Mandaean community in Jaramana. We both volunteered

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<sup>83</sup> Aside from IFPO (Institut Francais du Proche Orient) which organised two seminars, there was no other academic space which facilitated the meeting of new social science researchers in Damascus.

at the ISP, though spoke to different participants. I also pointed Ali towards a UNHCR study where the UNHCR was looking for a researcher to conduct an investigation into income generation practices of Iraqi refugees.

Through the UNHCR study Ali met Umm Mina who had been living in Sayyida Zayneb since before the American invasion. Another researcher had suggested to me that it may be worthwhile to employ a paid research assistant.<sup>84</sup> Ali and I discussed the possibility of sharing the costs of employing her as a facilitator to identify and introduce us to possible participants from her neighbourhood. There were a number of considerations that led me to believe this could be a fruitful avenue to explore. First, many of the researchers we had met in Damascus had focused on areas such as Mukhayim al-Yarmouk and Jaramana, which were familiar stomping grounds for researchers. Given the spatial distribution of Iraqis of different socio-economic backgrounds, I believed it important to identify possible participants in Sayyida Zayneb who may otherwise have been excluded. Second, the unusual character of the Sayyida Zayneb district (Szanto 2012) promised rich ethnographic material. Third, Sayyida Zayneb is home to the shrine of Sayyida Zayneb as well as the *hawzat* (Shi'i religious seminaries). Lastly, Sayyida Zayneb is the first port of call for buses arriving from Iraq to Damascus.

Through the introductions of Umm Mina, I met eight Iraqi refugees from her neighbourhood. Of these five resulted in interviews of which I utilized data from and transcribed three for the purposes of this thesis. The three interviews that were transcribed involved participants who did not have excessive expectations or indeed misunderstandings of what the interview was about. I use the following example not to illustrate why an interview was selected for transcription but to show why an interview was aborted and to emphasize again the paramount importance of the need to reduce the social distance between researcher and participant.

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<sup>84</sup>

Conversation with Eric Mohns, Damascus, 11 August 2010.

## 2.10. “I’m not UNHCR”: ethical concerns

I received a call from Umm Mina, asking me if I could get to Sayyida Zayneb in the afternoon; she had arranged for me to meet with a 60 year old television repair man from Najaf. “He has your number, so he’ll give you a call at around four o’clock. Make sure you’re there on time,” she told me. I arrived at Sayyida Zayneb with some time to spare and took the opportunity to wander in the street markets that run off of the Hejira roundabout. Half an hour later, I receive a call from Abu Ra’ad. We agree to meet at the entrance to the shrine. A short while later, a heavy set man in an immaculately white *dishdasha*<sup>85</sup> approaches me and introduces himself as Abu Ra’ad. He smiles and thanks me for coming to see him and his family: “Thank you ustadh Tahir, we have had so many people visit us, a delegation from the UK also. No one could help.” A delegation from the UK? Lots of people visiting him? I become confused thinking that I had come to meet a television repair man from Najaf and instead finding someone who hosts international delegations.

Five minutes later, we walk up a flight of narrow steps to the entrance to his home. As the door opens, I see the hurried movement of the women of the house as they prepare to receive a guest. I take my shoes off and walk inside. Abu Ra’ad ushers me into the living room. A woman sits at the foot of a bed. I assume it is his wife. I turn to see who else is in the room. An extremely frail 12 year old girl is lying on the bed. A saline drip hangs above her feeding into her intravenously. I’m taken aback, stunned. Abu Ra’ad explains it is his daughter and she suffers from some kind of debilitating muscular atrophy condition rendering her severely restricted in her movements. A further condition means that she finds it difficult to ingest food. “We hope you can do something, we hope the UNHCR can help”, Abu Ra’ad says. The words strike me across my face. Looking back on my field notes, I’ve noted how I felt at the time. My field journal reads: “shame colours my cheeks. I’m not UNHCR.” I explain to the family that I’m just a postgraduate researcher from London and that I have no connection to UNHCR or any other organisation. They look crestfallen.

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<sup>85</sup> A long, usually white, collarless shirt which reaches above the ankles, and is worn by men from the Gulf countries.

Some tea arrives for the guest. Abu Ra'ad tells me his story, but I'm unable to bring myself to broach the subject of why I had come to visit them. I stay and listen to some of the difficulties that Abu Ra'ad and his family face and we talk about the misunderstanding that led Abu Ra'ad to believe I was affiliated to the UNHCR. Having been told that a foreign researcher was coming to meet him, he had jumped to the conclusion that I was from the UNHCR. Umm Mina had not mentioned that I was a doctoral candidate. I left shortly after without discussing my project.

The experience reminded me of the paramount importance of conducting research in an ethical manner. Consent, as mentioned earlier, is contingent not only on the signing of a document but negotiated throughout the research process and is dependent on the trust between researcher and participant. Indeed, a trust deficit – particularly towards figures of authority - permeates the entire process of becoming a refugee (Hynes 2003). The state in the country of origin often plays a prominent role in the initial displacement; border officials may make demands upon entry into the host country, the UNHCR maintains a culture of disbelief towards refugee claims for asylum. In such contexts the signing of documents “carries a history of well-deserved suspicion” (Riessman 2005) as well as expectations.

### **2.11. “In Syria, everything is politics”**

On other occasions the expectations and assumptions of gatekeepers concerning my research project were not altogether positive. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Syrian state maintains a vigilant eye over the affairs of researchers, particularly those working in the social sciences and even more so where religion is concerned.<sup>86</sup> Given this state of affairs it is perhaps unsurprising that gatekeepers expressed reticence to get involved in my project.

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<sup>86</sup> An experienced researcher in Damascus related to me an anecdote concerning the state's paranoia about the role of Islamic groups in civil society. She had secured an interview with the Deputy Minister of *Awqaf* (Religious Endowments). The office of the Deputy Minister had requested to see the question schedule in advance. Arriving for the interview, she was surprised to find that the Ministry had set up video recording equipment. The Deputy Minister then read out pre-prepared answers to the questions. No questions were allowed. Conversation with Author, Damascus, 21 July 2010.

An Iraqi Shi'i cleric<sup>87</sup> who I had met a number of times at the Shirāzī *hawza* (religious seminary) in Sayyida Zayneb, eventually conceded it would be too difficult to be involved, expressing concerns of unwanted attention from the Syrian security apparatus. "Maybe if I met you in Europe, we could speak but not here" he told me. I presented the *muwāfaqa* (permission document) I had been given by the Ministry of Culture, clearing me to conduct research in Syria. The cleric took one look at it and said "That won't stop the *mukhabarāt* (security services) from taking me in for questioning. It's too dangerous." The cleric had been a refugee himself and had attained asylum in Europe. He told me he returned to Damascus to meet with friends at the *hawza*, people he had known while he was a refugee in Syria. Despite being a European passport holder, he still believed that any engagement with the security apparatus of the regime was a risk too far.

I met a similar rebuttal from the religious bureau of Hamas in Mukhayim al-Yarmouk. After having examined my credentials and interview schedule, the representatives at the office told me that their work was "educational and not political." And that they were "not best placed to answer the questions." Perplexed and somewhat aggrieved, I told them to take a closer look at the questions insisting that they were not politically framed questions. The Imam who had been called into the office smiled at me and said "In Syria, everything is politics." It was not only Muslim gatekeepers who were reluctant. Christians also demonstrated caution in engaging with a researcher exploring the points of convergence between religion and forced migration.<sup>88</sup>

Midway through my fieldwork I realized that perhaps I had been taking the wrong approach by looking to figures within religious institutions to help facilitate my study. In light of the Syrian regime's sensitivity to religion and the activities of religious organisations it is far from unexpected that clerics would be very

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<sup>87</sup> Despite not having a prolonged discussion with the Shaykh on matters pertaining to religion and refuge, we did touch on the subject. Interestingly, from the limited conversations we had it seemed that the Shaykh had adopted a statist discourse on refugees; referring to refugees in terms of the 1951 Geneva Convention.

<sup>88</sup> On approaching a convent which I knew to provide support to Iraqi refugees, I was told by a nun that it was Ramadan and the convent was on holiday during Ramadan. A friend later remarked he found it odd that God took holidays.

much under the watchful eye of the security apparatus. With hindsight, I can appreciate why religious figures chose not to extend their support to a newly arrived researcher with whom they had no prior dealings.

## **2.12. Transcription and translation**

As I noted earlier in this chapter, there are a number of interpretive stages during the research process. Interpretation is inherent in the to-and-fro between the spoken and unspoken words or actions of the researcher and the participants. Moving from the spoken word to text similarly requires an act of translation (transcription). What to include? What to omit? Where to add the rhetorical flourishes? It is “interpretation in the broadest sense of the word” (Temple 2002:847). Any number of synonyms can be used to translate a particular word. Translators find the one that fits into the rhythm of a sentence in the target language. This interpretive layer, which we can call transcription and translation, is far from unproblematic. Poland (2002) highlights the difficulties associated with transcribing a verbatim account, not least that such an account could leave the participant being represented on the page as incoherent (Kvale, 1995:27). To address this issue, some researchers have called for an unambiguously reflexive position with respect to the interpretive and representational nature of transcription (Mishler 2003, Kvale 1996; Poland 2002). I would hasten to add that the need for reflexivity extends beyond merely the stage of transcription but encompasses the entire process of conducting research.

Let us begin then, with the formulation of the question schedule. Although my question schedule was first written in English I asked a friend who taught Arabic to cast a glance over the translated version to ensure that the phrasing of the questions was as natural as possible before commencing interviews. For instance, concepts such as “local community” do not translate directly into Arabic. Questions were phrased so that I asked participants about the local neighbourhood as well as Syrian society at large. The difficulty of translating concepts across cultures has been acknowledged elsewhere (Lutz 2011, Hoffman 1989). To consider the translation of complex concepts as unproblematic smacks of something bordering on linguistic imperialism (Temple



2002:847). It also carries the risk of failing to recognize the dialogical construct at the heart of the interview; participants also read into, interpret or translate the interviewer.

To illustrate the complexity of translation, I refer to a concept which is at the heart of this thesis; religion. How do I translate a term as nebulous as “religion”? As I have pointed out, the term is much contested. The word “religion” in a European context is heavily imbued with notions of institutional and hierarchical power. Do I use the term *dīn* which carries with it wider connotations of being a way of life or do I use the more narrowly defined *madhhab* which points to the teachings of a particular school of thought within the Islamic tradition which govern the “how” of religion? In addition there are a host of additional terms such as *‘aqīda* (creed or belief), *īmān* (belief or faith), or *iltimazat dīniyeh* (religious practices) which are used sometimes in lieu of *dīn*. What of spirituality? The Arabic equivalent *ruḥāniyeh* wasn’t used at all by my participants. Instead, they would use terms such as *tasawwuf* (Sufism) or *tarīqa sufiyeh* (the Sufi way) to speak of spirituality. How do I as a researcher draw distinctions between such a multiplicity of terms? When do I know they are being used with a specific meaning rather than a general meaning? By virtue of my partial insider status, I was familiar with the uses of these terms and the contexts in which they would be used. Nonetheless, to avoid confusion and to tease out the distinctions, I asked specific questions regarding faith, belief and religious practices.<sup>89</sup> I employed this approach throughout the interview.<sup>90</sup> The appeal of this approach lay in the fact that it reduced the risk of over-emphasizing a singular aspect of religion which would have been determined wholly by me. Importantly, it encouraged participants to think of the many different facets of religion.

During interviews and initial meetings with participants there was a dual act of translation. In the first instance, participants would translate me.<sup>91</sup> My name is Arabic, but I’m not Arab. I speak Arabic, albeit a hybrid of Levantine with

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<sup>89</sup> Refer to the question schedule in appendix one.

<sup>90</sup> One participant wondered why I had repeated the questions over and again. I asked him if I had not would I have had a clear indication of what he had meant.

<sup>91</sup> In Chapter Four, I refer to Abu Yaseen’s reaction to the way I prayed in a Salafist manner. This resulted in some confusion as Abu Yaseen had translated me as not being Salafi.

Egyptian inflection and expressions thrown in. Understanding of Islamic traditions meant that I shared a particular cultural capital with my participants; an Islamic habitus. Not looking typically European also served to place me as someone who is not an *ajnabi* (foreigner).<sup>92</sup>

Of the five interviews with service providers, three were conducted in Levantine Arabic<sup>93</sup> and two in English. Of the interviews with refugees, four were conducted in English and the remainder in Levantine Arabic. The four participants who spoke English were all young Iraqis under the age of 26. They took the interview as an opportunity to put their English to use. Not being a native speaker of Arabic presented challenges. Arabic is not my second language, it sits in a cluster with two other languages<sup>94</sup> which could rightly be labelled as my third language. I “think” in English, yet expressions do not translate well in all cases from English to Arabic. *Pahari* (the language of my parents) a dialect of Urdu, is more useful in this respect. However, a cultural affinity between Urdu and Arabic does not necessarily mean familiarity. Translation requires insider knowledge and my partial insider status meant that I had imperfect insider knowledge. With my focus heavily on what was being said and concentrating to keep up with participants, I would sometimes miss tangential thoughts and lines of inquiry which only occurred to me on a second listening of the interviews. Moreover, in the face of overwhelming information, I automatically privileged the spoken word of my participants over the unspoken hand gestures that accompany animated speech.

Furthermore, it is not only a question of a mechanistic translation that takes place while interviewing; if it is true that people narrate stories about their lives in order to organise their experiences (Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992) then those

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<sup>92</sup> This allowed me to move inconspicuously around the city. When friends visiting from Europe came, shopkeepers in the souq would take unkindly to me assuming that I was a local pestering the tourists for business. No-one stopped to shout random English words or the few set phrases of English they had learned. My hybrid accent meant that I would often be asked where I was from. The reply was invariably “London” drawing even more puzzled looks and the repeated question: “No, but where, really?”

<sup>93</sup> I had chosen Levantine Arabic as it is closer to the Egyptian dialect that I was familiar with. The Iraqi dialect would have required a longer investment in time to learn. In addition, I reasoned that the Levantine dialect would be familiar with my participants given that they were living in Syria and also the prevalence of the dialect in Arab media.

<sup>94</sup> I also have a strong command of Turkish and Urdu. However, I rarely have the occasion to read in these languages.

stories are told through the prism and vernacular of a particular culture. Kenneth Plummer (2001:151) reminds us that translation is a meaning-making process:

“[A]ll life stories are embedded in particular cultures, and the act of translation is an attempt to ‘transplant’ the language from one culture so it can make sense in another without losing its original meaning.”

As noted earlier, the editorial hand of the researcher is never far away. The choice of words used to convey the meaning spoken by participants in a language and culture perhaps unknown to the reader are deliberate and undoubtedly influence the research. Transcribing in English while listening to interviews conducted in Arabic can result in a clumsily phrased and disjointed transcript. Bearing in mind Bourdieu’s injunction that the researcher must strive to arrange the interview so that it may “make sense” for the participant, I extend this maxim towards the direction of the reader also. The researcher must now arrange the recorded interview so that it may make sense to the reader. Listening to the recorded interview while reading the earlier transcribed work allowed me to make judgments on how best to translate with the English speaking reader in mind. Translation is part and parcel of the process of analysis (Temple 1997, Temple & Young 2004).

### **2.13. Data analysis**

Analysis is also entwined with the ethnographic method. Although I was not immersed in a wholly Iraqi environment I was in Damascus and able to observe the dynamics and spatial understandings of that city. Interesting conversations and observations concerning life in Damascus were noted in a research journal. In addition to actual interviews I conducted, the research journal was used as a reflexivity device to record my thoughts on how the interview was conducted, issues that arose through the course of the interview and how I felt after each interview. This proved particularly useful in coming to terms with framing a conversation on religion without it being completely subsumed by the eagerness of participants to re-tell their persecution narratives which often viewed religion in limited sectarian terms. It was through the recording of such thoughts in a research journal that I was able to introduce the subject of religion subtly by

asking respondents about their memories of religion in their home as children and about their religious education.

In a separate journal, I kept a record of thoughts that arose while translating and transcribing the recorded interviews. This allowed me to pick out emerging themes. Later, I was able to triangulate the record of observations with the data gathered through the transcription of interviews.

I also kept sound recordings of visits to markets and shrines in Damascus. Supplemented with photographs I had taken of everyday life in Damascus, I was able to prompt my memory to transport myself from within hushed walls of university libraries to Damascus when writing chapters related to the city and its spatial organisation.

#### **2.14. Coding**

My decision to employ a Bourdieuan framework, especially the concepts of habitus and field, helped to guide my ear while listening to interviews. In particular, I was attentive to the ways in which my participants' attitudes and dispositions towards religion had changed over time. In addition, the Bourdieuan framework guided the structure of my thesis; the earlier analytical chapters focusing on the formation of a religious habitus with later chapters drawing attention to how relations of power are distributed across Damascus, impacting on the current circumstances of Iraqi refugees particularly in relation to their ideas of religious traditions, networks and institutions.

I did not use any specific software to code the data produced through transcribing the recorded interviews. Instead, I read and re-read the transcriptions, colour coding recurrent themes. I then clustered themes along a number of different lines. First across the different communities of Iraqis, at which point extracts of narratives were highlighted and notes made. I then repeated this process along lines of gender, generations and their spatial distribution in Damascus. It was not necessary for me to do an analysis based on spatial distribution in Iraq. This was simply because the vast majority of my respondents came from Baghdad.

## Summary

In this chapter I have sought to position myself within complex debates on methodological approaches in the social sciences. Nebulous concepts such as religion require careful and deliberate unpacking which help to reveal how dispositions towards religious ideas, religious actors and institutions change over time. These changes can only be understood once we take into account the conditions under which such dispositions are activated. This demands that we map the position of participants against those of other actors and institutions. In the case of refugees the most prominent institutions which constrain choice and possible understandings are the state and the UNHCR.

Persecution narratives were cited as an example of one of the ways in which external structures organise how Iraqi refugees perceive their situation. I also drew attention to the watchful eye of an authoritarian state and its influence on how refugees speak about religion. This confirmed that religion exists alongside a number of other fields (in this case the security field) and that these fields, which together comprise social space, are not mutually exclusive. As such, it is imperative that religion in the lives of forced migrants is not analysed in isolation from other fields such as the economic, political, educational and humanitarian fields.

In order to understand the positioning of Iraqi refugees in Syrian society in particular in relation to the mobilisation of religious traditions, I have mobilised a Bourdieuan framework. However, any attempt to uncover the genesis or formation of the habitus of Iraqi refugees is contingent on interrogating their memories. I contend that particular attention ought to be paid to the articulation of memories and that eliciting testimony of participants is far from unproblematic.

In light of this, I advocate an approach in which episodes of life history as narrated by participants are juxtaposed against established histories. Such histories shed light on dominant narratives of the state's discourse of religion and are revealed in the testimonies of my participants as sectarianism. They also direct us towards popular cultural understandings of what religion is which are themselves rooted in narratives of a different kind - Qur'an and *aḥādīth*

literature in addition to the teachings of Islamic scholars. The focus on personal testimonies, I believe, serves to reveal the manifold and subtle ways in which participants' dispositions and attitude towards religion are informed and under which circumstances they move from being latent to being active. In short, personal testimonies provide us with a window through which to survey the tensions between state understandings of asylum and the stranger and Islamic understandings. Chapters Three and Four concern themselves with the memories of participants and the formation of a religious habitus. Chapter Five maps the humanitarian field within which religious ideas are mobilised. Chapter Six explores the practices that result from the interplay between habitus and field.

Finally, following Bourdieu (1999) I have argued that the transparent positioning of the researcher demands sustained reflexivity in order for the research project to make sense for both participants and readers alike. In this sense, interpretation imbues the entire research project, helping to uncover the ways and means in which presuppositions structure the world as experienced by both my participants and myself.

## Chapter Three

### Sowing the Seeds of Displacement: Religion and Society in Ba'thist Iraq (1980-2003)

*Abdullah bin 'Amr mentioned that Allah's Apostle said: "The best among you are those who have the best manners and character."*<sup>95</sup>

#### Introduction

The objectives of this chapter are two-fold. First, it serves to provide the reader with an understanding of the key contexts in which ideas about religious discourses and practices have been mobilised. To assist in this understanding, I make use of Iraqi refugees' memories of key events in Iraq's recent history. Second, it explores the possibilities of mapping the religious field in Iraq through the testimonies of Iraqi refugees in Damascus. I would argue that any discussion on how and why Iraqi refugees mobilise religious traditions and networks in Damascus demands to be fore-grounded in prior experiences and interactions with religious networks and institutions in Iraq. Testimonies of Iraqi refugees in Damascus can be a useful means for understanding how they regard religious networks, institutions and actors. Such testimonies allow us to place religion alongside other competing and complementary concerns over time. Testimonies are based on memories layered atop of older memories, latticed with collective memories, recalled and performed at a point in the here and now. The memories I elicit from my respondents bring to light generational differences in how events are remembered.

More precisely, I contend that in the case of Iraq such interactions become more clearly visible during times of crises wherein a weakened state appropriates religious discourses and symbolism to bolster its authority. During such events, attitudes and orientations towards religious ideas and actors are contested and re-interpreted, not only by the state and clergy, but by the laity also. The religious field is therefore not a closed circular system in which religious specialists are the lone players. Rather I argue, the religious field is

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Sahīh Bukhārī Vol.8, Book 073, Number 056

one influenced by other fields – it does not exist in isolation, dis-embedded from other spheres of social activity.

In this chapter, we shall see how the home as a site of learning helps inculcate religious habitus. I contend that the religious habitus forms a key component of the cultural capital displaced Iraqis take with them to Damascus. Understanding this involves interpreting religion within a wider constellation of social relations including the field of education encompassing learning passed through the family, state-citizen relations and kin networks. Mobilizing testimony, I explore the contexts in which religion has been a salient feature of home life.

Having an ethics based on Islamic precepts provides actors with a shared understanding of how to read social situations. In short, it informs their decision making process. However, to argue that ethics alone guide decision-making would be to over-egg the pudding. People do not always behave according to definite ethical principles, including their own ideal codes of thought and conduct. The context in which religious traditions and ideas emerge and gain relevance is of immense significance. What were the conditions which allow emphasis to be placed on religious identity rather than ethical concerns? The answer, I suggest, lies not in the religious field alone but in its relation to other fields and the wider field of power. In the case of Baghdad, we shall see how other societal pressures impacted on the religious field. Starting with the impact and memories of the Iran-Iraq war we can see how some Iraqi forced migrants, particularly Palestinian-Iraqis, recognize this as a defining point at which identities became increasingly coalesced around notions of religious belonging. I follow this by signposting key events over the past two decades which have had significant repercussions in the religious field. These include the immiseration of Iraqi society caused by the sanctions regime following the invasion of Kuwait and the re-emergence of tribal solidarities in the politics of Iraq and its relationship with *al-ḥamla al-īmāniyeh* (the faith campaign). Chapter Four will pay closer attention to the significance of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq and its ensuing sectarian aftermath. These events provide a specific socio-political and historical context to Iraqi refugee movements of recent years. Moreover, for the purposes of this study, it should be recognised



that these events contributed towards establishing a certain disposition that Iraqi forced migrants carry with them, in relation to understandings of religion, religious actors and religious institutions – which are ultimately reflected in the decision-making of Iraqi refugees in Syria.

Through a consideration of the modalities of belonging and identity formation other than through the prism of the nation-state, and in particular by introducing the role religion plays in the migratory process, we are able to break free of the restraints of methodological nationalism. The anthropologist Dawn Chatty reminds us that in the case of Syria religious affiliations, networks and institutions have played a pivotal role in nurturing a “local cosmopolitanism” (Chatty 2010:283) where cultural differences and commonalities are celebrated. Damascus, Chatty (2010:295) observes has “a complex association with the imagined past of the Ottoman Empire.” The territories of the former Ottoman Empire, including the modern state of the Syrian Arab Republic, still carry traces of the *millet* system<sup>96</sup> through which the Ottoman administration used to manage numerous ethno-religious communities which formed the Empire. The cultural memory of the *millet* lives on in interactions between the many ethno-religious communities which continue to reside in Damascus today. How, this memory asserts itself in the lives of Iraqi refugees is explored in Chapter Six. First we need to clarify how and where religious traditions, actors, networks and institutions fit in the life-worlds of Iraqi forced migrants.

### 3.1. Experiencing religion

A religious experience commonly calls to mind an encounter with the divine, the sacred or the mystical. It is likely to be considered a subjective experience, hidden from everyday human understanding.<sup>97</sup> However, I would argue that religious experiences or “experiencing religion” can be grounded in everyday interactions or lived experiences of religion. This takes us away from thinking

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<sup>96</sup> Under the Ottoman Empire, people were identified by their religious affiliation or confessional communities rather than by ethnicity. The *millet* system refers to the autonomy of religious communities pertaining to personal law. The term Turkish term *millet* is a loan word from the Arabic *millah* meaning denomination or creed.

<sup>97</sup> The philosopher and psychologist William James (2002) in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* has done much to foster this view. He tells us: “The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual” (cited in Taylor 2002:xxiv).

about the sacred or divine in limited subjective ways. Instead, as I pointed out in Chapter One, it brings us directly to the notion that religion organises social space such that it emphasises an individual's relations with other social actors.

To suggest that an attitude towards religion or having a particular religious disposition is something acquired at a fixed moment in time and remains unbending or unchangeable is highly reductive. A religious disposition is more than just an identity marker – it is a particular teleological prism through which the world is lived and experienced. It provides agents with spatial and temporal reference frames which position bodies within homes, homelands and the cosmos (Tweed 2006:97-98). It is not a static label but is developed and informed through everyday practices over time. Social actors are not one-dimensional and a religious disposition cannot explain all social practices they engage in. Religious actors and institutions are situated within a constellation of other complementary and often competing networks, which together comprise society. In short, the religious field is one of conflicting interests (Verter 2003) and is itself intimately linked to other competing and sometimes complementary fields. Religious symbols in and of themselves do not inculcate a religious disposition but understandings of religious truths are mediated through power (Asad 1993). As such, a nuanced reading of context is required where other political, cultural, economic and historical factors are considered in relation to the role of religion in the everyday lives of Iraqi forced migrants residing in Damascus.

By considering the religious lives of refugees and in particular how refugees mobilise religious traditions and networks to better access resources in exile, I have drawn on insights from the fields of sociology, welfare economics and narrative inquiry. A common theme in the literature I review in this thesis is the notion of experience. Amartya Sen (1981) points to the importance of people's expectations based on interactions with legal, cultural and social institutions and conventions. Clandinin & Connelly (2000:20) contend that narrative inquiry ought to be interpreted as a means of better understanding experience. Experiences are not extraneous to time but extend over time and space. As a researcher, I arrived at a specific point on this temporal continuum and asked

my participants to talk about their experiences: and in doing so they reflected on them from the here and now.

There are clear affinities here with Bourdieu (1977:82) who tells us that the habitus is “the past which survives into the present”, providing social agents with a disposition that simultaneously organizes and generates practices without preconceiving a conscious outcome (Bourdieu 1990a:53). Thus to speak of a habitus is to consider the personal histories of my interlocutors, their current economic and social condition, and how they relate to their decision-making and day to day practices in Damascus.

My inquiry is one that explores and interrogates the lived experiences of refugees. In this chapter, I examine the personal histories of those who participated in my research while acknowledging that representations of the past are precisely that: presentations performed anew for the purposes of a conversation with a researcher. The unearthing of memories is not an excavation of historic facts but rather the illumination of the multivalency of events. As such, discussions with participants on the immiseration of Iraqis between the Gulf Wars elicit linkages with increased sectarian tensions in Iraqi society and the retreat of the state from its welfare responsibilities. This opened up avenues of participation for non-state actors such as tribal and organised religious networks. Following Talal Asad (1993) I suggest that religious power becomes diffused in Iraqi society through disciplinary activities imposed on human bodies. Here, I am thinking of a pervasive atmosphere of religiosity which is embodied through increased attendances at mosques, greater visibility of veiling, etiquettes of hospitality, and communal gatherings such as the *ma'ida al-raḥmān* where food is publicly distributed for those fasting during Ramadan. This atmosphere of religiosity is mediated through social networks and institutions that encompass family, clan, school, state institutions and religious groupings. It is in relation to these groups that a religious disposition is inculcated. As Asad (1993:35) reminds us, it is “power that create[s] the conditions for experiencing [religious] truth. Particular discourses and practices [are] systematically excluded, forbidden, denounced – made as much as

possible unthinkable; others [are] to be included, allowed, praised, and drawn into the narrative of sacred truth.”

I suggest that it is useful to think of experience as being akin to the bricks of a plastered wall. A religious habitus, I suggest, is a certain disposition that informs those experiences and can be thought of as the sand in the mortar, without which the wall would collapse. By examining the life histories of Iraqi refugees in Damascus, I hope to strip back the plasterwork and lay bare the interstices where religion is situated in the lives of forcibly displaced people. In this chapter, I bring together testimonies of my participants and their memories of critical events in Iraq’s recent history with acknowledged histories. In doing so, I intend to shed light on the multi-faceted ways in which the religious habitus of my participants has been formed. I believe that through careful listening to the experiences of my participants we are better equipped to interpret how and why Iraqi refugees position themselves in relation to religious networks and institutions in Damascus.

### **3.2. The researcher’s experiences count**

In deliberating on how to approach the conundrum of researching religion without tumbling head-first into making reductionist claims, I was compelled to confront my own reasons for being in Damascus and for carrying out a research project on the subject of religion. It was the day of Eid al-Adha – the feast to celebrate the end of the Hajj – and I had been invited to have lunch at the Rābeta Falastīniya al-'Iraq (the Palestinian Iraqi Community Association) in Mukhayim al-Yarmouk. Around 40 men were seated cross legged on the floor, with a substantial spread of rice and cooked lamb laid out in the centre of the room before them. I took my place next to Tariq, who would turn out to be a valued friend and gatekeeper at the Rabeta. Tariq turned to me and asked “so what brings you here?” “Kull sana wenta tayyib”<sup>98</sup> I replied. “It’s Eid al Adha, Hajj Eesa and Abu al-Hassan invited me”, “No, why are you here in Sham?” asked Tariq again. Almost, as soon as I had finished telling Tariq about my research project, I was prompted by Abu al-Hassan to address everyone gathered to do

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<sup>98</sup> A traditional greeting used on the occasion of religious holidays.

the same. Later that afternoon, I spoke to a number of individuals separately, re-iterating how and why I had come to be spending the afternoon with them.

I mention this rather ordinary interaction, because it was a question that I was asked time and again by participants, other researchers, immigration officials and almost everyone I met. My answers would oscillate between the non-committal, vague and ambiguous response of "Damascus has always appealed to me" to lengthy discussions on the partition of Kashmir and how my grandparents and parents had adapted to life on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control. This in turn made me reflect on the context of the question and my response. Who was asking? Where were they asking? Why were they asking? If the people I had met were interested in my personal motivation for carrying out research on religious traditions of asylum in the context of Iraqi refugees in Damascus and the many different incidents in my life that had brought me to this juncture, then surely the same ought to apply to my participants. To understand how and why, if at all, Iraqi forced migrants mobilised religious networks and traditions in Damascus seemed to me to lie in broader processes not only in the here and now but in the recent past: in Iraq. First, let us briefly remind ourselves of current debates on how religious traditions and symbols are contested between state and society in the Middle East.

Dale Eickelman & James Piscatori (1996:18-21) have explained the contested nature of the interpretation and legitimation of religious symbols and discourse between the state and civil society. Salwa Ismail (2006:31-32) argues in her analysis of Islamist movements in Egypt that such contestations may also have a symbiotic dimension. The conservatives act as a bulwark against radicalism and in return there is an Islamic acculturation of the state whereby conservatives are able to exert greater influence over the boundaries of public discourse. She tells us:

Islamists and their opponents invoke Islamic history and call on signs and symbols from Islamic traditions. In the process, they re-write and re-construct these traditions. The state, the Islamists and the secularists all engage in producing the 'true Islam' position (ibid:168).

The multiple meanings and interpretations of these traditions are not solely the preserve of the state and other political actors. I contend that refugees, as active social agents, also engage in this continual process of interpretation and re-interpretation. This process itself is embedded in a particular cultural, socio-political and historical context. The narratives and discourses that emerge among Iraqi refugees do so in relation to key episodes in the recent history of Iraq. These incidences of disjunction and crisis have been many. First, let us examine how earlier engagements with religion, primarily in the context of home and family, have contributed to shaping dispositions vis-a-vis religious actors, networks and institutions.

### **3.3. Religion under Ba'thist Iraq**

The Iran-Iraq war was a watershed moment in the Ba'thist discourse on religion. Until then, Ba'thism had showed considerable ambivalence towards religion and was keen to maintain a strict separation between state and religion. The clerical class had lost its monopoly in key fields including education and law (Abdul-Jabar 2003b). The ability of Shi'i clerics in particular to generate income through pilgrimage to the shrine cities was heavily curtailed through imposition of bans on commemorating key events in the Shi'i calendar such as the 'Ashura festival, where the martyrdom of Imam Hussein is commemorated. Moreover, the shift in the Iraqi economy from being agricultural to industrial meant that there was a subsequent shift in the population being rural to becoming urban. The initial movement of landless, largely Shi'i migrants in the 1950s saw them settle in newly built suburbs such as Madinat al-Thawra in Baghdad. The dislocation that came with loss of social and welfare networks previously based around tribal solidarities meant that many new migrants gravitated towards labour movements and communism,<sup>99</sup> finding these to be politically meaningful in their new surroundings (Batatu 1978). Decimation of the labour movement under the Ba'thist regime meant that clandestine Shi'i Islamist movements increasingly became the only conduit for opposition to Saddam Hussein.

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<sup>99</sup> To counter the influence and rising popularity of the Communist Party and the secularization trend underway in Iraq, the Hizb al-Dawa was formed. The move by religious figures into political activism was met with derision by the Shi'i clergy (al-Ruhaimi 2002:152)

Importantly, these developments reveal a generational shift in attitudes towards religion. One area in which such generational shifts are evident is in attitudes towards marriage. A key purpose of religion is to enable people to “make homes and cross boundaries” (Tweed 2006:54). Marriage is deemed by many in the Muslim world to be the point at which people pass from youth to maturity and the first stage of a family’s home-making project. In Islam the significance of marriage is underscored by the Prophetic *ḥadīth*: “when a man marries he has fulfilled half of his religion”.<sup>100</sup> The following section examines the testimony of participants with respect to the issue of intermarriage.

### 3.4. Intermarriage

Any discussion of ethno-sectarian identities has to be tempered with the understanding that identities are multi-associational and not fixed, rigid categories. Later in this chapter we see how tribal affiliation under the last two decades of Ba’thist rule was equally, if not more important as a key identity marker.<sup>101</sup> Many of the Iraqis I met were from families in which intermarriage among Shi’i and Sunni was commonplace. In addition, many of my respondents were from Baghdad. For such a cohort, carefully pencilled lines demarcating identity based either on tribal or sectarian affiliations seem reductionist.

One such example was Mahmoud. Mahmoud is a softly spoken, 65 year old physician who had completed postgraduate studies in the UK during the 1970s. This had been the one occasion in his life where he had lived abroad in a foreign culture, leaving a lasting impression on him. Mahmoud had grown up in Aadhamiye, a largely Sunni area which was later to be the site of intense sectarian conflict during the American occupation. His father was a Shi’i military officer from Hilla and his mother was Sunni. Mahmoud described his father as “a religious man who prayed but did not push his views on to his children”. Religious education at school was at primary school level with less emphasis on religious studies at secondary school. Later in life, on returning from his studies in the UK, Mahmoud married Hala whose family were Sunni and who was herself a practising Sunni Muslim:

<sup>100</sup> Al-Tirmidhi Number 3096.

<sup>101</sup> Reidar Visser (2008a) suggests that academics and policy makers have long viewed Iraq through the prism of sectarian identities while neglecting regional affiliations.

Mahmoud: I didn't know there was anything like Sunni and Shi'i until I got to university. It wasn't a big deal to be Sunni or Shi'i. After that I learned that some families if they are Shi'a, they prefer to marry someone from the Shi'a and the same for the Sunnis, but most people they don't differentiate like that. My best friend at college – he was Jewish. For the first year, I thought he was Christian. His name was Maurice – he had changed it from Moshe. After a year I knew he was Jewish and I told him that I heard he was a Jew. He said 'yes, is that a problem for you?' I said 'no'. He said 'you were born with your father and mother as Muslim and I was born with a Jewish father and mother'. So, it wasn't a big deal what somebody's religion was.

Hanan is 29 years old and grew up in Basra in the south of Iraq. Her family are Sunni though she described them as not being overtly religious – only her mother would pray and fast on a regular basis. Her father had a career in the military before moving into commerce and opening a chain of supermarkets. Although Hanan took to wearing a hijab in 2004 no other member of her household had done so before her. Her decision to wear the hijab was out of conviction and an expression of her independence. She currently volunteers as a counsellor at a women's rights organisation in Damascus. I had asked her about the impact of the faith campaign:

Hanan: Looking back now- it wasn't sudden like a blink of an eye but yeah in the space of a year or maybe a few years- the whole of society changed. People started to pray and yeah many things changed. Whenever people talked about things they would connect it with religion [...] people became not only conservative- they became closed-minded. They started to see people in terms of how they looked and not who they are. This was something new, it didn't happen before, I mean before the *ḥamla al-īmāniyeh* (faith campaign). Oh and there's something else, I think that even *ta'ifiyeh* (sectarianism) became more and more visible after people became religious.

Tahir: [registers surprise by raising an eyebrow].

Hanan: Please don't tell me this has nothing to do with religion – it does. I'm going to give you a simple example. Before I became religious, I was about to marry someone – my ex-boyfriend. He was Shi'i and I'm Sunni and we were going to get married and have a family and such, but we never thought about this (being from different sects). After, I became religious - of course we broke up for other reasons and not just this - so after I became religious, I started to think what if? What if we get married and just to be selfish I want him to follow the same rituals and customs that I do or the other way round he wants me to follow the rituals and customs of his faith, or maybe it's our families that are putting on this pressure, it would put the whole marriage at risk. Now for me, it's okay for me to marry someone from another sect, but I need to be sure that



he's very open minded – that he won't interfere with my own beliefs and practices. I wouldn't do the same to him and we'd have to be very open towards the children and I need to be sure that this issue isn't going to be a source of problems. I need to make sure that his family don't interfere also – my family too. It's all very difficult. Nowadays, everyone interferes and it becomes a problem. I know people and I've met many women through my work who have been divorced because they are from a different sect – and they've been married for many years in some cases twenty years or more. So, I think logically, for us as Iraqis it's not good to inter marry unless as I told you we make sure that everyone understands the other.

Mahmoud had grown up in a very different Iraq from Hanan. The urbanization of Iraqi society had only just begun and religious education at schools was taught nominally. With the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 the new regime led by Abd al-Karim Qasim enacted a law which would have significant repercussions on the religious field. The Personal Status Code of 1959 marked a radical departure from previous laws which had been a knot of disparate and occasionally overlapping Islamic rulings by different schools of Islamic Law be it Hanafī, Shāfi'ī (Sunni) or Ja'farī (Shi'i) that upheld tribal and patriarchal values. The law thus served to eradicate differences between the sects while maintaining that it was still based on Islamic precepts (Anderson 1960). The progressive interpretation of Islamic Shari'a as stated in the Personal Status Code addressed gendered inequalities in Iraqi society. Polygamy was severely restricted; dissolution of marriage was extended to women in a number of different circumstances while a husband's unilateral right to divorce was curtailed. In addition, in matters pertaining to inheritance, women were given equal rights. Such debates received considerable attention in Iraqi media at the time and were a matter of much debate.<sup>102</sup> As a significant piece of legislation, the Personal Status Code of 1959 directly impacted on domestic understandings of religion; it drove at the heart of configuring power relations within families.

Both Mahmoud and Hanan had come from families which they had described as not being overly religious. Mahmoud's generation can be seen as part of the

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<sup>102</sup> An article in al-Thawra March 7 1960 reports an interview with Abd al-Karim Qasim where he defends the progressive elements of the code against religious traditionalists using arguments from the Qur'an (Anderson 1960:562-3).

milieu that agitated for social change. Nadjé Al-Ali (2007:108) writing on women's experiences of the 1958 revolution observes that the revolution brought with it "relatively liberal values and social norms" and that identities were shaped more by social class and political orientation rather than ethnicity or religious affiliation. Hanan's parents were part of that same generation. In both cases, one parent was regarded as someone who prayed regularly but neither had parents who asserted their views of religion onto their children. For Mahmoud, intermarriage between Sunni and Shi'i was not considered to be an exceptional occurrence.

Mahmoud's anecdote about a Jewish acquaintance reveals much about attitudes towards communitarian identities in the early 1960s. Following the 1958 revolution, the government of Abd al-Karim Qasim broadened its support beyond the land-owning Sunni class and enjoyed popular support across the many different faith communities in Iraq. However, being Jewish had increasingly become equated with being Zionist. The government of Abd al-Karim Qasim had begun to co-opt the Palestinian cause as an important cog in the struggle for wider Pan-Arab ideals.<sup>103</sup> Mahmoud does not dwell on why his friend had felt it was necessary to change his name to a more Christian name; in narrating the story of Moshe, Mahmoud demonstrates a stance against sectarianism which has become so prominent in Iraq in recent years.

Hanan, on the other hand, grew up in an Iraq where religion was once again reclaiming cultural and social space. Faleh Abdul-Jabar (2009:89) points to the changing skyline across cities in Iraq where the mosque to person ratio shot up from 1:37000 at around the time Mahmoud was entering university to 1:3500 by the late 1990s. The state had also begun to relax its grip on control over mosque attendance, even encouraging it with the institution of the faith campaign which I shall address later in this chapter. Hanan's assertion that society had changed rapidly is perhaps more indicative of the fact that her own social interactions were widening through going to university than there being a

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<sup>103</sup> As early as March 1960, the government of President Abd al-Karim Qasim announced the formation of the First Regiment of the Palestinian Liberation Army under direct supervision of the general Iraqi armed forces and financed from the budget of the Ministry of Defence (Mohammad 2007:53-56).

sudden shift in attitudes. What is undeniable is that there had been a significant change in inter-communal relations. This change in attitudes cannot be understood without taking into account the cumulative effect of events of the early 1990s and in particular the repercussions of the quelling of the Intifada Sha'abaniye, when the Southern provinces of Iraq rose up against the Ba'thist regime. In his examination of sectarianism in Iraq, Fanar Haddad (2011) points to competing narratives of events surrounding the uprising put forth by the state on the one hand and Shi'i activists on the other. What emerges is a complex picture wherein Shi'i victimhood and grievances against the Ba'thist regime – which employs the sectarian discourse of *shu'ubiyah*<sup>104</sup> - is portrayed by the very same regime as sectarian agitation fostered by outside powers. This in turn, further entrenched sectarian identities.

Hanan's assertion that "nowadays, everyone interferes" is an acknowledgement that households in Basra had begun to privilege sectarian identities. Her father, a former Ba'thist officer in the Iraqi army, would have been familiar with the state discourse on both the Gulf war defeat and the uprising which followed. For a young woman planning on getting married, consent of the family (although not a legal requirement) is deemed necessary. Heightened sensitivity to sectarian affiliation at the level of households which built up through the 1990s made inter-marriage a distant prospect. Hanan's current interactions with Iraqi women in Damascus vindicate, in her view, her decision not to inter-marry.

Hanan and Mahmoud are examples of people whose early lives were not overtly influenced by matters of religious identity. A religious identity at home jostled alongside other identities of social class and gender; of being Iraqi and of being Arab. Now, I examine two cases where religion played a more prominent role in the childhoods of my participants.

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<sup>104</sup> As the early Islamic conquests spread beyond the Arab heartlands and came into contact with non-Arabs, new adherents to the faith questioned the privileged position of Arabs within the Empire. This movement came to be known as *al-shu'ubiyah*. With Pan-Arab nationalism re-emerging in the middle of the 20th Century as a powerful political movement, the term *shu'ubi* was revived by Arab nationalists to denigrate dissenting voices (Hanna & Gardner 1966).

### 3.5. Growing up with religion in the home

Aref is 24 years old and had left Iraq in 2005. He described his family as being “religious but not *mutazammit* (strict)” - allowing him to watch television and listen to music. His grandfather was the Shaykh at the neighbourhood mosque and this gave his family some prestige. At school he was known as the grandson of the Shaykh. I had got to know Aref through the Iraqi Student Project where he was studying to get a scholarship for a university education in the United States. In class discussions he would often make reference to an Arab and Muslim identity. For him, the two were inseparable. On one occasion he confided in me that he used to share typically Iraqi jokes and songs with the other (younger) students so that they would not lose their sense of “Iraqi-ness”. On another occasion I saw him lead other students in the *qiyam al-layl*<sup>105</sup> prayer during Ramadan when we had gone on an excursion one night to sight a meteor shower that was predicted to take place. I asked him what it had been like to grow up with religion in the home and whether his friends had similar upbringings:

Aref: I had two friends that were killed in the last war. But like me, they were religious people, they would pray five times a day at the mosque. We made our mosque like our homes. Every day you could see us there at prayers, or activities: cleaning the mosque, helping the elderly and providing food to the poor.

Tahir: what do you mean by activities?

Aref: Different kinds of activities. First of all, I remember working in the mosque – if it needed cleaning, bulbs needed changing or walls needed painting – we used to spend so much time just hanging out at the mosque. The second thing would be collections: my grandfather and then later the Shaykh who came after him would collect money from people who have extra money for the poorer people. He would give us some food or gifts in bags and would direct us to houses to go and give them the bags.

As a child Aref had spent much time in and around the mosque. This was not unusual practice for many young Iraqi males. ‘Ayyash al-Kubaysi, a spokesperson for *Hay’at al-‘Ulamā al-Muslimīn* (The Association of Muslim Scholars), posited a direct correlation between the international embargo on

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<sup>105</sup> Literally, “the standing of the night”; a supererogatory prayer often described as the best of (the non-compulsory) prayers given that it is offered before dawn when most people are asleep.

Iraq and the increased visibility of Islam or as he put it, during the decade preceding the American invasion young men “were reared in the mosque,” and “the mosque embraced them” (cited in Baram 2005:9). Aref's reference to his local mosque being made like home is a significant theme that cropped up time and again in the conversations with my respondents. It alludes to a domestic understanding of religion which privileges notions of home and family. It serves to remind us how deeply entwined religion is in more ordinary daily practices. Rather than gazing skywards in our search to understand religious practice, we are better served by casting our gaze to what is happening around us. In Chapter Six, I return to the idea that home-making is a central facet in the structuring of relationships within a religious world-view and address it in greater detail.

Sara headed the women's committee at the Palestinian Iraqi Community Association and was responsible for women's activities at the centre. On our very first meeting, she told me how struck she was when arriving in Syria and seeing Palestinian Syrian girls dressed in “western” attire. Sara would always be dressed in the cloaked *abaya* and hijab. For her, this was an expression of religious commitment as important as the activities she organised at the centre. Her commitment to her faith was derived from an understanding of Islamic ethics and had been something that she had learned at home rather than at school:

Sara: My father – May God bless him – always used to say that education is essentially the learning of *akhlāq* (good manners and ethics). So, when you have sound ethics, you can find the true image of Islam. We were raised on knowing what is permissible and what is forbidden (*ehna mutarabbiyin 'ala ḥalal wa ḥaram*) yes, no – right and wrong. So we depend on our faith to perfect our *akhlāq*. If you have *akhlāq*, you can find the path through life a lot easier. At school, we'd just be told how to memorize certain verses from the Quran and that was about it. I would often go to the mosque every Friday to listen to the Shaykh giving his sermon. He would talk about how to deal with people, about *akhlāq bil dīn* (good manners and ethics in religion). These were the most important things. Religion is something important to build the foundations of our lives and after that you can deal with your affairs gradually built on those foundations.

Sara's linking of education with ethics and a "true image of Islam" brings us back to her understanding of religious commitment. Her surprise at how "western" the clothing of women in Damascus was affirms Talal Asad's (1985:14) suggestion that the social sciences ought to approach the study of Islam as a "discursive tradition". The education Sara refers to is an education in Qur'an and *aḥadīth* literature which bears upon the ethical and moral outlook of an individual such as Sara and results in practices which project what she terms the "true image of Islam".

The importance Sara attaches to *akhlāq* in pertaining to how she conducts herself cannot be under-estimated. It is through the prism of *akhlāq* that all other dealings are predicated upon. In Bourdeuian terms, *akhlāq* is embodied cultural capital in the form of habitus. When Sara speaks of being "raised on knowing what is permissible and forbidden" she is speaking of a particular education passed on to her from her family; a certain way of interacting socially, a specific way of reading the game. This is something that Bourdieu (1962:108) himself recognized while working on the Mزاب region in Algeria where an "atmosphere of Islam [...] permeates all of life, not only religious or intellectual life, but private, social and professional life". Though he does not name it as *akhlāq*, this is precisely what informs the polite set phrases that punctuate everyday conversation and interaction (ibid.). Similarly, Sara's claim that through *akhlāq* "you can find the path through life a lot easier" and linking this to how she deals with people suggests that being attuned to *akhlāq* is what actually brings "regularity, unity and systemacity to (her) practices" (Bourdieu 1990a:59). From a theological perspective, Islam is built on the concept of *tawḥīd* (the oneness and unity of God). The Islamic declaration of faith, the *shahāda*: *La illaha ilallah Muḥammad al-rasūl Allah* (there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God) can be interpreted to mean that belief in the unity of God can be practised in how people interact with one another through the example and teachings of Muhammad. Knowing how to deal with people is at the core of religious understanding and experience for many of the people I spoke to in Damascus and is explored in further detail in Chapter Five.

Let us now consider how key events in recent Iraqi history have helped shape attitudes and dispositions towards religion, religious actors, networks and institutions. Religions do not exist in isolation, dis-embedded from wider society: they are part and parcel of the multiple fields which in aggregate comprise social space. The conditions under which a religious habitus is developed cannot be understood independently of changes in other fields. Bradford Verter (2003), writing on the utility of Bourdieu's theory of practice to the understanding of religions, observes that Bourdieu employs a particularly narrow and rigid concept of field. Bourdieu acknowledges that fields are autonomous, be it the field of education, religion, science, art or politics. Each field contains structural parallels with the over-arching field of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:98-99, 105-10). However, he falls short of explicitly recognizing that changes in one field may directly impact on another. In the case of religion, he retreats to laboured Marxist readings of religion as being a means of veiling political and economic domination, failing to apprehend how religion could possibly "be connected to the symbolic economy of a broader cultural nexus" (Verter, 2003:156). Even where it is employed to dominate politically or economically, Bourdieu fails to recognize the agency of social actors by assuming that religion is a closed circular system in which hierocratic institutions monopolise production of religious ideas.

### **3.6. The Iran-Iraq war**

Before Saddam Hussein officially assumed power following the resignation of President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr on July 16 1979, Iraq was riding the crest of a wave: on the cusp of what many of my interlocutors nostalgically referred to as "the golden age". Thanks largely due to its immense reservoir of oil wealth Iraq was considered to have been transformed from a quasi-feudal society to a modern urban one over a period of 50 years (Ismael and Ismael 2004:127). In 1947 just over one in every three people lived in an urban area. In the space of four decades 72% of the Iraqi population was residing in an urban area (Abdul-Jabar 2003b:62).<sup>106</sup> The challenges brought about by rapid urbanisation were

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<sup>106</sup> Key social indices from the time seem to uphold the notion of a "golden age": GNP per capita stood at \$1594; nearly three times that of the average GNP capita of less industrialised countries (Ismael & Ismael, 2004:127). A comprehensive commitment to the building of a social infrastructure based on

met head on by the state which invested heavily in education and health. However, by 1977 there were signs that Iraq was shifting towards becoming a more militarised state. The ratio of health spending relative to military expenditure revealed that Iraq had fallen behind all other OPEC members, with an equivalent of 6% of its defence expenditure spent on the healthcare sector (Sivard 1980). This shift towards a greater military industrial complex was to be further compounded by Iraq's war with Iran.<sup>107</sup>

In February 1979 the revolution, which toppled the Shah of Iran, sent shock waves reverberating throughout the world. Leaderships in Iran and Iraq each viewed the other as illegitimate and unrepresentative of their people. Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian leadership sought to appeal to fraternal links with the Iraqi Shi'i to help depose Saddam and the Ba'thist regime. With the growing presence of Hizb al-Dawa, and in reprisal for an assassination attempt on Tariq Aziz (the Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq) which was attributed to Iraqis of Iranian descent (Chubin and Tripp 1988), the Ba'thist regime set out to expunge all threats of the so-called "Islamic revolution" spilling over into Iraq. This culminated in the execution of the leading Shi'i cleric Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr and his sister Amina Bint al-Huda. Membership of Hizb al-Dawa was declared a capital offence. Thousands of Shi'i clerics, students and activists were arrested in the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala and in the Baghdad suburb of Madinat al-Thawra (Chubin and Tripp 1988:27). Anyone having the slightest semblance of Iranian ancestry was deported – the Arab organization for Human Rights put the upper limit for the number of deportees at 400,000 (Babakhan 2002:183). Under the pretext of re-claiming full sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab, Iraq launched an invasion of Iran and attacked 10 of its airfields on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1980.<sup>108</sup>

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health and education continued unabated from the 1950s until the assumption of power by the Ba'thist regime (ibid:127-9).

<sup>107</sup> It can be argued that equating Iran with the Shi'i creed and Iraq with the Sunni creed has long been a part of Arab nationalist imaginings. Olivier Roy (2007:80) suggests that the roots of this misconception can be found in the rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires despite there having been significant populations of Sunni and Shi'i on the territories of both Empires.

<sup>108</sup> For a detailed analysis and account of the war see Chubin, S & Tripp, C (1988) *Iran and Iraq at War*, London: IB Tauris & Co.



Where Iran sought to appeal to their Shi'i co-religionists in Iraq by Islamicizing the conflict (Chubin and Tripp 1988:38-41), in Iraq parallels were drawn between the current conflict and the early Islamic conquests when the Arabs had taken on the might of the Persian Sassanid Empire at the battle of al-Qadissiya in 637AD. The propaganda machinery of the regime was quick to dub the war *Qadissiyat Saddam* or the *Qadissiya* of Saddam (Dawisha 2009:234) Saddam Hussein in his addresses to the nation appealed to the Arab identity of Iraqis; as Arabs they were pitted against their Persian foes:

Iraq is once again to assume its leading role. Iraq is once again to serve the Arab nation and defend its honour, dignity and sovereignty. Iraq is destined once again to face the concerted machinations of the forces of darkness. Saddam Hussein, Nineveh, 15 April 1980.

(cited in Chubin and Tripp 1988).

One particular group in Iraq for whom the Arabization of the Iran-Iraq conflict was to have long-lasting repercussions were the Palestinians<sup>109</sup> who had settled in Baghdad and Mosul after having been displaced from their ancestral homelands in Palestine. The following section considers the testimony of Palestinian-Iraqis, drawing attention to generational differences in how the events of the Iran-Iraq war are remembered.

### **3.7. Palestinian memories of the Iran-Iraq war**

For many Iraqis this was the beginning of an age of almost continual unfettered war. I had met Abu Fu'ad, an avuncular man with a bristly moustache, of 71 years of age at the Palestinian Iraqi Community Association in November 2010. Abu Fu'ad was one of many Palestinian-Iraqis of a certain generation who had twice been displaced; firstly, from Palestine in 1948 at the age of seven and then once more in 2009 from Baghdad. The *nakba*<sup>110</sup> - or the cataclysmic events of 1948 which resulted in the protracted displacement suffered by Palestinians - had instilled in him, as with many others of his generation, an understanding

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<sup>109</sup> For the sake of brevity, Palestinians displaced to Iraq after 1948 will be referred to henceforth as Palestinian-Iraqis in this thesis.

<sup>110</sup> For more on the role that the *nakba* plays in the collective memories of Palestinians see Abu-Lughod and Sa'di (2007).

that Palestine was at the core of an Arab identity. Growing up in Baghdad listening to Gamal Abdel Nasser's speeches had awakened within him a political consciousness that encouraged him to take part in student demonstrations in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Arab nationalism was on the ascendency regionally and the centring of the Palestinian issue resonated with the Ba'thist ideal of "one indivisible Arab nation". From his student days onwards he would be what he called *ḥizbi* - a committed member of the Iraqi Ba'th party. In the years to follow, he took up a position in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, working as an inspector of government storehouses. His opposition to the Iran-Iraq war ultimately led to him being ousted from his position at the Ministry. I asked him about the impact that the Iran-Iraq war had had.

Abu Fu'ad: Up until the war, the *tandhīm al-Falastīni* (Palestinian organisation) had been a part of the regular army. Then it became part of *jaysh al-sha'bi* (the popular army). I mean it was only made up of something like 600 fighters. At the beginning, people were eager to fight against the Iranian attacks. As a result, there were a series of rifts in the relations between Palestinians and Iraqis. They say to you: 'you're a Palestinian; you have an issue of your own. You're not an *ibn al-balad*, why do you want to go and be conscripted to fight the Iranians?' Why would that individual say that? It's a result of the issue of sectarianism that Iraq was experiencing at the time; the issue of Sunna and Shi'a. When the Iranian revolution took place- who was being held back? In Iraq it was the Shi'a that were hemmed in. People who weren't Iraqi nationals were supposed to show their loyalty by fighting side by side with the Iraqis against the Iranians. So, that's why it seemed to Iraqis that we were mercenaries; *mutrazaqa* [...] they'd say some things which didn't make sense. 'You've been our guests for forty years – why are you fighting?' We were forced to do it, in all honesty. It wasn't our intention, it wasn't because we loved Saddam Hussein or that we were with him; that we were *Saddamiyīn* (Saddamists). There was compulsion. For instance, an employee affiliated to the party, people who had interests that tied in with the state, we were all forced to join in. From that time on, relations between us and the Iraqi community at large just worsened. We felt that we were competing with them in showing loyalty to the country. Then, this kind of attitude just became more widespread, more universal among Iraqis. They said 'you're Sunna and that's why you fought against the Iranians'. We were hated, we weren't praised [for participating in the war]; I mean this was forced on us. As a result I tried to, widen relations with Iraqis, tried to get closer to them, to make them understand. Some of them did understand. They'd say 'you're in the same boat as we are'.

In this Palestinian-Iraqi account of the Iran-Iraq War, Abu Fu'ad is trying to come to terms with why Palestinian-Iraqis had become targets of Iraqi Shi'i. He traverses almost 25 years to locate what he regards as the root cause of his current predicament of having been forcibly displaced to Syria. The accusation of fighting against Iran for sectarian reasons comes from the same quarters which later organised and employed sectarian violence against the Palestinian-Iraqi community. He switches from an account of Palestinian-Iraqis volunteering at the outset of the war to doing so under compulsion. This apparent contradiction perhaps emerges as a consequence of the dilemma in which Palestinian-Iraqis found themselves in as "guests for 40 years" rather than being an "*ibn al-balad*" or a native son of the country.

This was compounded by the sense that Palestinian-Iraqis always had to prove themselves as hospitable guests despite the behaviour of the host to other family members "by competing with them [Iraqis] in showing loyalty to the country". The ultimate litmus test for loyalty to any state is willingness to serve in the armed forces. Yet, Palestinian-Iraqi involvement in the war generated ambivalence among Iraqis. The bureaucratic labelling of Palestinians as "guests" by the state was adopted in public discourse in Iraq. Palestinians were expected to know their place and show gratitude for the hospitality shown to them rather than challenge the stratification that placed them below the status of citizen. Fatima, a 40 year old housewife from Mosul, told me:

Fatima: Whenever there would be a problem between us and our neighbours or someone, they'd remind us we are Palestinians living in Iraq. They'd say things like *enta nazzil wa dabchu 'ala sath* (you're a guest and you dance on my roof). It's an old Iraqi proverb that means you think you're better than us: that you don't even have respect for your hosts

Abu Fu'ad's analysis of the role of Palestinian-Iraqis in the war, places Palestinian-Iraqis in the same bracket as every other Iraqi who was compelled to take part in Iraqi society as envisaged under the dictates of the Ba'thist regime. To say no to the regime was to risk losing your job, business and perhaps your liberty and that of family members. The incorporation of *al-Tandhīm al-Falastīni* (The Palestinian Organisation) into *al-Jaysh al-Sha'bi* (the

popular army) was not one that was decided upon by the Palestinian-Iraqi community. The *Jaysh al-Sha'bi*, made up of 75,000 Ba'thist volunteers,<sup>111</sup> was created to act as an alternative to the military as the sole means of coercion; to mobilise violence in the service of the core of the Ba'th party – in effect, a militia (Chubin and Tripp 1988:19). By association, the Palestinians were also tainted with the accusation of being mercenaries for Saddam, despite Abu Fu'ad's insistence that their role was limited and secondary in both number and function.

For both my interlocutors and I the uneven, thorny terrain of memory is mapped out from the vantage point of our co-constructed interviews in the present. Scholars in the field of memory studies have long pointed to the salient function of retrieving the past to serve the needs of the present (Halbwachs 1992, Portelli 1997, Nora 1998, Bal et.al 1999). Listening to Abu Fu'ad's narrative of the Iran-Iraq war, I became increasingly aware that past events and memories of past events are invariably re-interpreted in the light of current modes of being and recent experiences. It also serves as a reminder that my cohort of respondents was identifiable not only along lines of gender and religious affiliation but also by generations. One virtue of mapping the memories of my participants through experience is that it makes manifestly clear that some respondents had lived through events which others had not.

Earlier in this chapter we saw, through the testimonies of Hanan and Mahmoud, how there had been a shift in attitudes towards the prospect of intermarriage among Sunni and Shi'i Iraqis. Similarly, Abu Fu'ad's experiences helped shaped how he interpreted communal relations and by extension religious networks, institutions and traditions. As mentioned above, he had lived through the *Nakba* where he had witnessed Christian Palestinians martyred in the defence of his village. This helped create a sense of solidarity among the displaced Palestinians (irrespective of which faith community they belonged to) or what Abu Fu'ad called "a feeling of brotherhood" as they fled from the Zionist army to Jenin. The rhetoric of Arab nationalism – which theoretically transcended

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This number grew to 250,000 by the close of the war (Abdullah 2003:190).

communal difference - allowed him to position the loss characterized by the *Nakba* at the heart of what it meant to be Arab, Iraqi and Palestinian. The outpouring of popular support shown to Palestinians on their arrival in Iraq left a lasting impression on him. He told me:

Abu Fu'ad: Some of the 'ulamā demanded that every family in the West Bank and Jordan should welcome as guests the Palestinian families that had been dispossessed [...] During the course of the journey, at Rutbeh, the first town which you come across once you cross the Jordan/Iraq border- the people of Rutbeh started crying when they came out to welcome us on our way to Iraq. You could sense the feeling, the emotions. They were deeply affected and were crying over what had happened to us. They gathered whatever they had to spare from their homes; clothes, blankets and distributed it amongst us.

Marked by such experiences, Abu Fu'ad refused to be drawn into a bounded sectarian identity and stressed the importance of engaging with all Iraqis regardless of communal affiliation. Such shows of popular support for displaced people also helped shape his attitude towards religious actors in the humanitarian field, enabling him to bridge the gap between the disposition to believe and the disposition to act. I had asked him if Islamic traditions pertaining to protection and asylum had any relevance today. He told me:

Abu Fu'ad: Yes, I think there is a connection between those traditions and what happened to us and I noticed something like this. When there was the *Nakba* there was a certain feeling of brotherhood among us. If one had something and another didn't they would offer it to him; aid was shared out equally among the people. When we came to Syria, some of the people here opened their doors to us and let us stay with them. Others provided material support; food, and day to day things. Religion does play a big role. Even churches have been providing a lot of support. Why? Why do churches do this? Their teachings tell them that this is the right thing to do. So religion does play a big role in the provision of aid and in creating this fraternal feeling among people.

For other Palestinian-Iraqis who had grown up under the shadow of a Ba'thist regime under which sectarian identities had been instrumentalised, a different narrative emerges. In some cases, the consequence of the Iran-Iraq war was felt further afield. Mu'tasim was born in Baghdad but at the age of four had moved to Saudi Arabia where his father had managed to find work as an Arabic

language teacher at a government school in the Dammam province.<sup>112</sup> As such, Mu'tasim spent much of his childhood in Saudi Arabia, returning to Baghdad each year during the summer break from school. He eventually returned as a 14 year old with his family to Baghdad in 1990. I asked him what it was like growing up in Saudi Arabia at the time:

Mu'tasim: I woke up in Saudi, I really did. The 10 years of my life I spent there I became aware of Saudi – its different provinces, its geography. Little by little, the most important thing I came to understand was just how much the Shi'i in Saudi hated us because of the war between Iran and Iraq. They didn't consider us Palestinians but rather Iraqis and that was it they'd insult Iraqis [...] I remember when Khomeini died around the end of the 1980s – I was around 14 years old. One of the Shi'a around where I lived said '*entu kafara* (you're disbelievers), Iraqis are disbelievers. Saddam is a *kāfir*.' What do I know about these things? I was a kid at the time. What's a Shi'a what's a Sunna? I didn't know. All I knew was that I was Muslim just like them. I didn't know. And it was here that we started to see the issue of Sunna and Shi'a – an issue between Iran and Saudi. So here I started to notice things. At school, there were teachers who were Shi'a and they disliked me to the point that they would make it hard for me in the classroom. But the Sunna teachers – no; they would be really helpful and spend time with me. There was this one time, when another student attacked me and beat me. I responded by doing the same. A teacher came – he didn't know who had started the trouble and immediately hit me, can you imagine? This used to bother me a lot and I wanted so much to leave Saudi and live in Iraq where we didn't know anything of Shi'a and Sunna- and where everyone I knew was either a relative or a friend.

Again, the Sunni-Shi'i cleavage immediately rose to the fore in my conversation with Mu'tasim' with no prompting of the issue of sectarianism. In seeking to understand the role that religion played prior to the displacement of Iraqis, it would be ill-considered to disregard the very negative consequences of identities forged primarily around religious belonging. I return to the consequences and causes of sectarianism in the following chapter. Indeed, the issue of sectarianism was a common feature of many of the conversations I had with Iraqi forced migrants from all faith communities, raising questions on the

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<sup>112</sup> Reidar Visser (2008) has made the compelling argument that methodological nationalism and an insistence that the conflict in Iraq ought be viewed solely through an ethno-sectarian lens has in fact obscured the utility of understanding the recent history of Iraq through the notion of regionalism. As such, the Eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia – which have a significant minority population of Shi'i have traditionally lain within the gravitational pull of Basra as a regional centre rather than the Hejaz to the West.

role researchers and bureaucratic institutions play in the production of “narratives of persecution”.

Interestingly, Mu'tasim was considered by Saudis to be an Iraqi rather than a Palestinian. He told me he had got into fights with local Saudi teenagers on the grounds of being an Iraqi and Sunni. Given his age at the time and his interactions in Baghdad being limited to staying in his local neighbourhood, visiting friends and family, Mu'tasim had idealized Iraq as being a refuge free from sectarian cleavages. This was a discourse of Iraq that Mu'tasim's father's generation would have recognized; as we saw with Abu Fu'ad, this was a generation that had come of age with Arab nationalism. However, unlike Abu Fu'ad, who recognises that the Shi'a in Iraq were a marginalized community under the Ba'thist regime, Mu'tasim fails to make any connection between the subaltern position of Shi'a in Saudi society and his interactions with them. For him, Shi'i figures of authority – teachers in this case – and older Shi'i youths are equally culpable of being carriers of sectarianism. In contrast, the Sunni teachers are shown to be empathetic and kind. Having considered the ramifications of the Iran-Iraq war on the Palestinian-Iraqi community, let us now turn our attention to how the war affected Iraqi society at large.

### **3.8. The wider impact of the Iran-Iraq war**

The human cost of the war with Iran was staggering; over a million people, from both sides, were killed (Chubin and Tripp 1988). A generation's aspirations and hopes were dealt a crushing blow, lives were turned on their heads, as breadwinners were taken away to fight, some never returning. Farouk was a university student in Baghdad studying Hebrew literature. Unlike the more marginalised Palestinian-Iraqis who had begun to feel the searing heat of the sectarian flame, Farouk's memory of the war is typical of the many middle-class Baghdadis whose experience was primarily marked by the loss of loved ones and lost opportunity, in particular the chance to travel abroad:

Farouk: I lost a lot of people close and dear to me. That was the main impact of the war on me. It affected me on a human, social and psychological level. Two of my cousins on my mother's side of the family were martyred. Another two cousins on my father's side were martyred also. These were people I had grown up with and gone to school with;

they were close to me. Because of the war, there was little or no opportunity to travel. I wanted to complete my postgraduate studies in England and I got permission to do so, but then events took a course of their own and the decision was cancelled. That was in 1986 and it was supposed to be looked at again but it wasn't. Instead, they opened a department for higher studies at the University of Baghdad. I then got the chance to continue with my Masters at the end of the 1990s.

A shortfall in the labour market emerged, which was taken up by 1.25 million Egyptian labourers and others from Arab countries (IOM 2004). One respondent remarked: "If you threw a rock, it would have landed on the head of an Egyptian. There were so many [Egyptians in Iraq] at the time." Here, we can only conjecture as to what the impact of such a significant number of Egyptians on the Iraqi religious field was. What is clear is that it coincided with a greater visibility of the Salafist trend in Iraqi public space. Abu Yaseen, a Palestinian-Iraqi school teacher who regularly attended *dhikr*<sup>113</sup> at the mosque of the Sufi shaykh Abd al-Qadr Jeelani, told me:

Abu Yaseen: After the Kuwait war, the government was pre-occupied with this war and we know what happened, happened. There appeared in Iraq the idea of *Salafiya* (Salafism) or what they call in Iraq *Wahabiya*. (Wahabism). A lot of books started coming out on this idea in bookstores. In Baghdad, there's a famous market full of booksellers called Souq al-Mutanabbi, and you started to see more and more of these books on display. At that time, you were really hard pressed to find books on real Sunni texts. For example, I tried to find a certain book on the *madhhab* of Abu Hanifa. I couldn't. Lots of people started joining this [Salafi] trend.

More research needs to be carried out to ascertain whether there is a direct correlation between the migration of Egyptian labour to Iraq and the trend towards Salafism in certain Sunni quarters. My own experiences, albeit in an altogether different context of a cosmopolitan London, suggest that this may indeed be a possibility. Increased migration from non-commonwealth countries to the UK in the late 1980s and 1990s meant that my own idea of what Muslim meant – here, read South Asian – expanded to include Somali, Arab, Turk, Kurd, Nigerian and Bosnian to name but a few. Identities began to coalesce around a shared faith. This was as much in recognition of having shared cultural

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<sup>113</sup> *Dhikr* is a devotional act which requires the repetition of the Names of God or verses from the Qur'an. Literally it means remembrance. *Dhikr* is usually associated with Sufi religious practices rather than Salafi practices.



practices that stemmed from faith as it had to do with negotiating racial identities in 1990s Britain. Increased interaction with other kinds of Islam led me to question cultural practices which were tied with the Islam I had learned and inherited from my family. I began to be increasingly exposed to the writings of prominent clerics such as Shaykh ibn Taymiyya and more contemporary clerics including Shaykh Nasir al-Din al-Albāni – both of whom are key figures in the Salafist canon. My exposure to their writings came through networks of friends, informal study circles, at mosques and organised lectures.

During the Iran-Iraq war, children grew up without seeing their fathers for months on end, as they were called away to serve on the front lines. Another respondent referred to Baghdad as having “become a city of women.”<sup>114</sup> Simon had been married a few years before the war began. He had regularly found work in the construction industry throughout the 1970s and had started a family. The war intervened and robbed him of what he saw as vital years between him and his children:

Simon: We had four children. Every three months I would come back and see them once. When the children don't see their father or talk to him on a regular basis, a wall of separation builds up between them. It's difficult to raise a family correctly like this. On top of that don't forget there were a lot of martyrs as a result of that war and that impacted greatly on society and the children that were left behind [...] I had two tours of six months each and then it was eight years in the army followed by another shorter stint of two months in 1990. I mean it wasn't that we really wanted to be there – we were forced to be on the front lines and do our military service. Every war in the world leaves a negative impact on society. First of all, the economy is annihilated, the country is faced with high unemployment, and you start seeing discrimination much more clearly.

Conceptualizing religion as being integral to the process of home-making assists understanding of religious ideas in relation to lived everyday practices. In chapter One, I drew attention to the salience of “home-making” (Tweed 2006) in our understanding of religious practice and beliefs. The “wall of separation” that Simon speaks of captures the strains put upon family ties and threats to

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<sup>114</sup> Nadje Al-Ali (2007:146-70) provides a riveting account of the lives of Iraqi women during the Iran-Iraq War shedding light on how the state sought control over women's bodies through assigning them the role of 'mothers of future soldiers' and issuing a raft of legal decrees regulating the reproductive rights of Iraqi women.

understandings of home. These tensions, which began with the Iran-Iraq war and continued through a decade of a debilitating sanctions regime imposed on Iraq, can help explain the “worldly roots of religiosity” (Abdul-Jabar 2003a) in contemporary Iraqi society. On his return to civilian life, Simon found a country that was a mere shadow of the one he remembered before the war. Unemployment was rife; as a labourer on a construction site, he faced stiff competition for work from Egyptians. Iraq remained an economy that was predominately dependent on its oil revenues. With the price of oil plummeting along with Iraqi capacity to pump oil, food prices and other imported commodities pointed in the other direction. Iraq had gone from owning \$35 billion in foreign reserves at the beginning of the decade to accumulating debts in excess of \$100 billion by its close (Dawisha 2009:223, Abdullah 2003:190).

A central argument of this thesis is that religious traditions are a significant resource in the strategies and initiatives employed by Iraqi forced migrants. Understanding of religious practices and the mobilisation of specific religious traditions cannot be dis-embedded from the material context of the lives of people. In Bourdieuan terms, changes in one field may have ripple effects in another. That is to say, changes in the field of politics or law for instance have repercussions in the structure of the religious field. The repercussions of changes in one field affecting another became more pronounced following the corrosive impact of sanctions on Iraqi society.

### **3.9. The invasion of Kuwait and sanctions**

With the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, a massive reconstruction effort was required, estimated to cost around \$452.6 billion (Abdullah 2003). Instead, a raft of economic measures including the privatization of state agricultural holdings and small industry, along with a down scaling of welfare provisions through the reduction of subsidies and removal of price controls on basic commodities led to further decline in the Iraqi economy. This was compounded by collapsing oil prices resulting in a loss of \$7 billion in annual revenue to the Iraqi treasury (Abdullah 2003:190-192).

Saddam Hussein responded to the collapse in the Iraqi economy by accusing Kuwait of sabotaging the Iraqi economy through purposefully suppressing oil prices by pumping more than their OPEC quota allowed. On 2 August, 1990 Iraqi troops and armoured divisions rolled into Kuwait, heralding the beginning of an ill-fated occupation and 13 years of sustained sanctions against a beleaguered population. On 6 August, 1990 the UN Security Council passed resolution 661 requiring a comprehensive ban on all imports to and exports from Iraq “not including supplies intended strictly for medical purposes, and in humanitarian circumstances, foodstuffs.”<sup>115</sup>

For an economy that was heavily dependent on trading oil exports for basic necessities including food staples, the impact of resolution 661 was crippling. The 1991 Gulf War led by the US and its allies witnessed more than 170,000 bombs dropped over Iraq (Cordesman 1999: xvi) shattering what remained of the country’s already fragile industrial infrastructure.<sup>116</sup> The economy was not the only aspect of Iraqi society to suffer. The blanket nature of the embargo also had a hugely disruptive impact on the health sector. Prior to the 1991 Gulf War, 92% of Iraqis had access to safe drinking water and 93% were within the coverage of modern health facilities (Field 1993).<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> United Nations, Security Council Resolution 661 (1990), paragraph 3(c)

<sup>116</sup> The Iraqi Economists Association noted that the bombing campaign aimed specifically at Iraqi public infrastructure was “the direct cause of the collapse of economic activity in Iraq in 1991” (cited in Gordon 2010:22). Per capita yearly income fell from \$3510 in 1989 to \$450 in 1996 (UNICEF 2003:2) translating into “the nullification of nearly half a century of growth and improvement in the living standards of the population” (al-Nasrawi 1994: xv).

<sup>117</sup> Health infrastructure had been funded through the oil bonanza of the 1970s. 97% of Iraq’s urban population and 71% of the rural population had access to primary healthcare services (CESR 2003:13) Physicians were sent abroad to Europe and North America to receive government funded training (CESR 2003:17). The reputation of Iraqi health services was second to none in the Middle East.

As of 1995, Iraqi hospitals were carrying out major surgical operations at 30% of pre Gulf war levels and were faced with acute shortages of rudimentary medicines (al-Nasrawi 2002:96). In a visit to hospitals and health clinics in the South and Central provinces of Iraq Garfield et.al (1997:1474) found Iraq to be “a second world country, accustomed to a first world health system, which now has the epidemiological profile of a third world country.” They sketch an almost Dickensian picture of the state of health services in Iraq where one third of hospital beds were unavailable and unsanitary conditions prevailed in most hospitals – one hospital had a cleaning budget of just \$2 per month. Chronic shortages of anaesthetics and surgical materials and appliances meant that doctors were being forced to improvise and modify their practices (ibid).

The blanket ban on imports exacerbated food insecurity in a country which had till then imported 70% of its cereals, vegetables, oil and sugar (WHO 1996). A World Health Organization report found that Iraqis were more likely to suffer from clinical disorders such as obesity rather than any risk of malnutrition (ibid). In the space of less than a decade, one million children under the age of five were to

My participants confirmed the corrosive impact of the sanctions regime. Moreover, its effect was not merely limited to the durations of the sanctions themselves but the fall-out continued to influence events well into the American occupation. Mohammad is a short, bespectacled man, 37 years of age. I had met him through Sister Therese at the Convent of the Good Shepherd in the old town of Damascus. Mohammad had been an officer in the Ba'thist military. Having graduated from university with a degree in electrical engineering, opportunities for work had become increasingly remote. Mohammad came from a relatively well-to do Sunni family of merchants and military officers in Baghdad. Like many others from Baghdad, his family was originally from elsewhere, from Fallujah. This was a source of much pride for Mohammad. Eventually, for lack of options, Mohammad had settled for an administrative job in the military. I asked him how the sanctions had impacted on him:

Mohammad: We were left with no money. Any savings you had just lost all value. They became a tenth of what they were. If you had a million dinars it was now worth a hundred thousand. This was a great loss for us. We started selling what we had. Our cars, the gold that we had in our family, my mother's gold, my sister's gold. The banks were turning people away. The value of what we had in the banks amounted to ten million dinars - it all went. This brought us to an end. After this, I had to start working as a taxi driver [...] there were people, lots of them who continued with their education and had got further qualifications and they were working as plumbers. The economic blockade annihilated Iraq completely. Iraq is the country between the two rivers (*balad ma bayn al-nahrain*); it's a country of agriculture and industry. It has natural wealth and resources. Its teachers, doctors, engineers started working as painter decorators. A monthly salary of 30000ID would be the same as a

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be found to be malnourished (UNICEF 1998:23). In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf war it was estimated that just over 46,900 children under the age of five had died as a direct consequence of the war and the sanctions. Garfield (1999) puts the figure of under five mortality at 227,000 for a seven year period following the war, others found that the under five mortality rate had increased five-fold in the four years after the war, putting the figure in excess of half a million children (Zaidi & Smith-Fawzi 1995:1485).

Under the aggressive leadership of the United States, resolution 661 was interpreted so extremely that it seemed almost entirely arbitrary and random in designating which goods could be considered as having an industrial use. In her excellent analysis of the sanctions regime in *Invisible War*, Joy Gordon meticulously lays bare the culpability of the United States in the suffering endured by the Iraqi population at large:

Iraq could buy finished clothing, but not sewing thread, because that was an 'input to industry.' Because Iraq was permitted to buy only finished products, Iraq lost the benefit of the value added in production while its own labor [sic.] and manufacturing plants lay idle. These measures went well beyond any rational concern about dual-use goods or the use of Iraqi industry to rebuild its military (Gordon 2010:234).

one dollar or maybe just over a dollar and ten cents. It got to the point where a single dollar was worth 4000ID and then it dropped back down to 3000ID. It was a catastrophe. Could you imagine surviving on that for a month? It's impossible. So a person was forced to look for alternative work just to keep going. Your salary was a dollar and a tray of eggs would be worth \$3[...] my daily routine at the time was reduced to waking up and going to work and then from that job going onto the next job and then returning home exhausted. You never got a chance to do anything else. At that time there wasn't even satellite television; we just had two TV channels. The Americans realized that if the country didn't go down in flames they would destroy the infrastructure of the country little by little, gradually. So we got to the point where people started hating the government. That's what they [the Americans] were working towards. So we had got to that stage. After that we arrived at the point of the beginning of the end and we've ended up where we are today.

Mohammad recognizes the abrupt slide of a proud and self-sufficient Iraq to one that had been robbed of its wealth and talent. His reference to Iraq being the country between the two rivers recalls Iraq as being the cradle of civilization: a region that had given the world so much, only for its educated people to be humbled into working low paid manual jobs. He then follows up by talking of a determination and resolve to continue regardless of the futility of the situation where a monthly salary would barely be sufficient to purchase one third of a tray of eggs.

As with Abu Fu'ad earlier in this chapter, Mohammad connects the events of the 1990s to his current status as a forcibly displaced person in Syria. The severity of the blockade becomes a defining event in the Iraqi calendar; the principal point of departure to which many subsequent developments can be traced back. This extract of Mohammad's testimony also captures the very public register of many of the testimonies I had gathered. Casey (2004), writing on the period of public grieving which followed the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, refers to "public memory" to signal the simultaneity and the repetitiveness of similar yet different accounts of people's experiences. Equally, the oral-historian Allesandro Portelli (1997:27) posits a communal mode of what he calls "history-telling". This is characterised by respondents referring themselves to the plural "we" rather than the first person "I" and considers a social and spatial referent that encompasses the neighbourhood, the community and the workplace. Mohammad's continual use of the communal

“we” designates such a shared experience when talking about the impact of the sanctions. These are stories that have been picked up along the way from others caught in the same trajectory and braided into more individual accounts. Mohammad's use of the motif of a tray of eggs was used time and again by other interlocutors also to demonstrate the immiseration of the Iraqi middle-class.

It is in the context of a protracted war with Iran and the biting, degenerative consequences of a sanctions regime in the following decade that we begin to see religion take on greater significance. Cumulative shocks throughout the 1980s and 1990s meant that many Iraqis were compelled to confront key ontological questions. Religious narratives became increasingly integral to meeting the psycho-social, cultural and political needs of many Iraqis at individual and collective levels. However, state control over religious institutions – a situation homologous to Syria – combined with the erosion of the welfare commitments of the state meant that alternative structures and spaces were found in which religion could be located. The following section considers one such space which re-emerged in the 1990s.

### **3.10. The re-emergence of tribal solidarities**

An important consequence of the Iran-Iraq war was the re-assertion of the tribe into the cultural and socio-political structures of Iraq during Ba'thist rule. In the following pages, I chart the re-embedding of tribal solidarities into the fabric of urban Iraqi life. I venture that the re-emergence of tribal groupings in an urban context is coterminous with the re-energisation of religious solidarities in Baghdad during the 1990s; religion and tribalism in the Iraqi context are not mutually exclusive.

Faleh Abdul-Jabar (2003c:79-91) contends that this process had its roots long before Saddam Hussein took power and disputes essentialist notions of what tribal affiliation in Iraq means. He posits that in the recent history of the Iraqi state three distinct forms of tribalism have emerged: *étatist*, military and social. Drawing exclusively from favoured Sunni Arab clans, the first form relates to how the Iraqi state integrated tribal elements from their rural base into the

bureaucratic structure of the state itself, and in particular the security services, in a bid to bolster the precarious hold over power that the ruling elites had to that point enjoyed.<sup>118</sup> Military tribalism was a more limited phenomenon and is used largely to refer to the recruitment of Kurdish tribes against the Kurdish *peshmergha*<sup>119</sup> who were agitating for autonomy from the Iraqi state. In the war against Iran they were deployed as a frontier force.

In contrast, social Tribalism was discovered rather than created by the Iraqi state. During the early years of the Iran-Iraq war, Shi'i-Arab tribes in the South of the country, with no prompting from the state, spontaneously rose up to defend their territory against Iranian troops, bringing into sharp relief the divergence between Arab and Persian Shi'ism. The Ba'thist regime seized on this opportunity to re-energize tribal traditions of valour, honour, and courage through promoting tribal war poetry extolling such virtues (Al-Ali 2007:155). With the prolonging of the war, the state had begun to recede from its welfare commitments to rural areas. In such spaces, the *fakhdh*<sup>120</sup> would re-assert old leadership duties that it had once enjoyed. By the beginning of the 1990s, the rehabilitation of the tribe was complete. Tribal leaders were invited to the presidential palace to give *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance),<sup>121</sup> hoisting their tribal banner aloft before presenting it to the palace as a token of obedience and submission to the state (Abdul-Jabar 2003c:92)

While tribal solidarities were being rehabilitated and re-inserted into Iraqi society, other factors were also at play. The 1950s saw the migration of rural masses from the southern provinces of Iraq to the capital. Many were settled during the rule of Abd al-Kareem Qasim (1958-63) in the newly created eastern suburb of Madinat al-Thawra. Though Madinat al-Thawra came to have a largely Shi'i demographic, other faith communities had also taken the

<sup>118</sup> The July 17 1968 Ba'thist coup was the seventh such attempt to take power in the decade following the 1958 revolution (Dawisha 2009:209)

<sup>119</sup> Literally those who face death. The term is one of self identification for Kurdish rebels fighting for an independent Kurdish homeland.

<sup>120</sup> Tribal affiliation is organised on a number of levels. The broadest is *qabīla* (tribe) followed by *'ashīra* (clan). The clan can be divided into *fakhdh* or *afkhadh* (sub-clan[s]). The fourth level *hamoula* (extended family) constitutes the real kinship group and can be divided into a smaller category: *beit* (household units) (Abdul-Jabar 2003c).

<sup>121</sup> The bay'a has considerable religious significance. The tribes of al-Aws and al-Khazraj gave bay'a to the Prophet Muhammad- inviting him and his companions to Madina.

opportunity to settle in Baghdad. Among them were the Mandaean Sabeans<sup>122</sup> community from the southern provinces of 'Ammara, Nassriya and Basra.

I met Hamid, a jovial character with a hearty laugh, at his home in Jaramana, a southern suburb of Damascus and an overspill of the Christian community of Bab Touma. Jaramana is also home to a large Druze community and a significant number of Iraqi refugees of all faith backgrounds. An over-sized painting narrating key tenets of the Mandaean faith and John the Baptist dominates the wall of his living room, behind the dining table. Various family members were coming and going as it also happened to be Hamid's birthday. In addition, Hamid is also a significant personality in the Mandaean community. In Iraq he was a representative on the Minorities Council and was also part of the committee that had been assigned to oversee the translation of a sacred Mandaean text, the Ginza Rabba from an archaic Mandaean dialect of Aramaic to Arabic. As is the case with many Mandeans, Hamid was a goldsmith and jeweller – a profession, along with carpentry and smithing, which has traditionally been handed down from father to son and for which Mandeans, in particular, are renowned for in Iraq. Hamid explained to me that though the tribal system in Iraq is predominately Sunni, Shi'i and Kurdish, there are avenues of participation open to other faith communities:

Hamid: In Iraq, from the North to the South, you have *asha'ir* (clans). There are Sunni and Shi'i clans, depending on which area you are in. For instance there is an 'ashīra (clan) called al-Muhammad, or al Su'ad or Chinaneh, for instance. So, where did we fit in? The main clans, in the area we were from, were the al-Muhammad and the al-Su'ad. We had an alliance (*taḥāluf*) with them. I mean, my father, my uncles, my grandfather agreed a pact with them. So for each individual in your community you would pay them a tribute of sorts. What was this in return for? If you had a difficulty, these clans would protect you. Do you know what I mean? They would protect you. They called us in Iraq, *dabāb al jirsh*. We're not originally from this clan, but given that we are allies (*mutaḥālifīn*) we were given this name. So, all Mandeans are allied to them through this. Even when there is a problem amongst us, the clan would arbitrate. For instance I'm allied to the Chināneh and someone

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Mandaeism is a gnostic faith originating out of the Middle East. It shares much with other Abrahamic faiths including belief in the Prophets and an afterlife. The chief Prophet for the Mandeans is John the Baptist and baptism is a key ritual. They are also commonly referred to as Sabeans and are mentioned as such in the Qur'an. For further reading refer to Buckley (2002).



else [another Mandaean] is allied to al Su'ād then these two clans would sit down and resolve our problems for us, because the clan is the one that has the power. The tribal leaders are the ones with power. Even if we had problems with Muslims – ordinarily, we'd be afraid; they're Muslims and they consider us as being below them, but I say don't talk like that I'm with the Chināneh. They'd say but your Sobi and I say yeah but I'm Chināneh. So, we let the shaykh know and he knows who you are because we give them money. So we'd say such and such said this to me and I have a problem with him. The Shaykh would say, go and don't worry. He'd go and see the sheikh from the other clan and resolve the problem. You see how the system works. You asked me about the group of Madaeans that were poor living in Thawra. Each of these was strengthened by their links to the '*ashīra*'. Not all were poor just because they lived in Thawra. Some opened jewellery stores in Thawra – they worked there. They were protected by these *asha'ir*. Do you understand what I mean? People would understand – this one is Sobi, but he's Chināneh also. In Iraq they don't call us Sabi'a, they call us Sobi. So he's Sobi, but he's Su'adi; this one's Sobi, but he's Bahaji, This one's Sobi but he's al-Muhammad. Like that. Everyone would be known to the shaykh of the '*ashīra*'. We are known as Chināneh. My father was a well-known and respected man. So, these *shuyūkh al-asha'ir* (tribal leaders) were friends of his. They all would call on him for favours. He was a sociable man. Whenever there was an occasion or celebration they would invite him and he would visit them. So all he had to say was that he was known by such and such and they would say 'we're at your service'. And that's how problems would be solved. That's what relations were like.

Here, Hamid's description of *dabāb al-jirsh* closely resembles what Edouard Conte (2003) refers to as an "agnatic illusion" whereby an elective kinship is forged. However, asymmetric relations prevail and the one seeking protection is not always the equal to the one granting protection. According to Conte (2003:33) the one seeking refuge and protection is affiliated to the tribe through a process known as *kitba*.<sup>123</sup> He tells us:

This written, publicly negotiated and proclaimed pact (*mithaq*) combines various aspects of the covenants of brotherhood (*mu'akhat*), neighbourly protection (*jīwār*) or political alliance (*ḥilf, muḥālafa*), all three in existence from the remote past.

However, this can only take place where there is a possibility and acceptance of intermarriage (ibid:42). In the case of Madaeans, this is something which is inconceivable. Thus, only through tribute can *jīwār* (neighbourly protection) be

<sup>123</sup> For a more detailed analysis of tribal practices in Iraq see Salim's (1962) account of marsh dwelling tribes living on the Euphrates delta.

ensured. Here, we see how tribal solidarities were re-constructed anew in urban geographies. The Mandaeans who had settled in Baghdad continued to rely on tribal solidarities to resolve disputes that arose with their neighbours. Hamid's reference to his father and his relations with the tribal leaders suggests that despite their re-emergence, tribal solidarities may not have been as effective in their new urban settings. Ordinarily, the power of certain tribes was limited to particular regions in Iraq. Rapid urbanization meant that the strength of the tribe was fractioned as members were relocated to urban centres where power is diffused through the bureaucracy of state apparatus rather than through tribal solidarities. In addition, étatist tribalism had favoured specific Sunni clans from Saddam's hometown of Tikrit, privileging them over clans from other regions in Iraq.

In the context of Baghdad, a microcosm of Iraqi society, cleavages between privileged and non-privileged clans came to the fore. Moreover, with the formation of the modern Iraqi nation-state, social mobility through channels other than the tribe had meant that there was a considerable segment of urban society that had no tribal affiliation. The reconstruction of tribal solidarities and the intrusion of customary law into the fabric of urban life meant that recourse to justice could be negotiated through the authority of the tribe rather than the police or courts of law, which were increasingly seen as corrupt institutions of the state. The revenue stream generated through the collection of taxes, tributes and penalties allowed tribal actors to leverage greater political influence and power (Abdul Jabar 2003c:93-95).

By 1997, the diffusion of power between the state and tribal groups in an urban milieu meant that state employees with no tribal solidarities were subject to growing levels of intimidation by tribal groups. In response, the Revolutionary Command Council of the Ba'th party (RCC) felt obliged to issue Resolution no.24 reminding tribal groups in no uncertain terms that they were subordinate to the state.<sup>124</sup> This tension became particularly apparent during the mid-

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<sup>124</sup> Resolution no.24 reads: "Any person who advances tribal demands against he who has committed an act upon orders from a higher authority or to enforce the law, shall be imprisoned for a period no less than three years" (cited in Abdul-Jabar 2003c:99).

nineties when the state sought to capitalize on growing religious fervour in the face of the debilitating effects of the economic blockade on Iraq.

### 3.11. The faith campaign

The *ḥamlā al-īmāniyeh* or faith campaign initiated by the Ba’thist regime in the early 1990s can be seen as an appendage to the on-going social tribalism of the time. It was a means of re-affirming tribal identities. Much of what was proposed by the regime under the faith campaign was concordant with the beliefs and values of the millions of migrants who had made their way to urban centres across Iraq (Dawisha 2009). Paradoxically, following the failure of the Iran-Iraq war, it was also a response to the Iranian Revolution which had triggered a renewed orientation to religion or what some of my interlocutors referred to as a *ṣaḥwa īmāniye* (awakening of faith) through much of the region. Coupled with living under the intense pressures which came with economic blockade it was perhaps unsurprising that many Iraqis developed a more religious orientation. For the Iraqi state, this was a double-edged opportunity. Firstly, it provided the prospect of appeasing increasingly influential tribal elements upon whom the state was growing more and more dependent on for providing both welfare and security. Secondly, much like other states in the region had done, it sought to curb the influence of conservative elements by co-opting the discourse of Islamist actors (Ismail 1998). Abu Fu’ad explained to me why he thought many Iraqis had developed a more religious orientation:

Abu Fu'ad: Religion, we say, is like the tears of a friend; it's hard to deal with. So, Saddam found this faith campaign to take them [the Iraqi people] away from getting involved in politics that was based on religion, it wasn't because of faith. That was the point of establishing the campaign. It had nothing to do with true religion. The state was scared of the emergence of political parties that were based on religion. The state failed; it failed in its attempt to do so. In fact, the opposite happened. People started going to mosques a lot more than what the state had expected or desired. The state had wanted to prevent people from finding refuge in political parties based on religion but that's exactly what happened. Everyone had their own interests, the opposition and the government. People just wanted a bite of bread whether they got it from the state or from somewhere else. The important thing was that they were able to satisfy the hunger of their children. No more and no less. I mean, the Iraqi people faced unprecedented pressure on life that the

world had not seen before. Hunger, poverty, unemployment, from all sides there was pressure.

Abu Fu'ad's assertion that the faith campaign had "nothing to do with true religion" is significant. It draws attention to the way in which the faith campaign was regarded by many as being an instrumental tool in the hands of the state where religion was mobilised to serve identity politics. It also highlights a struggle between the people and the state over the meaning of religious traditions. People are shown to be active agents rather than mere consumers in the religious field when Abu Fu'ad claims "everyone had their own interests". The failure of the state to assert its authority over the Iraqi people by means of the faith campaign is also testament to the struggle in the religious field.

In the latter chapters of this thesis we will have a clearer insight as to what true religion means for forcibly displaced people such as Abu Fu'ad. The impact of the faith campaign was also keenly felt by minority groups. The conservative mores of tribal tradition dictated that visible signs of a liberal culture they were unfamiliar and uncomfortable with were targeted by the state. This manifested itself in increased control over women's bodies and prohibitions on the public consumption of alcohol. For the Mandaean community this carried an additional existential threat as some Sunni preachers encouraged attacks on them. Mandaean tribal solidarities with Shi'i clans meant that they were exposed to less of a threat from Shi'i neighbours.

To counter the growing hostility engendered by certain Sunni preachers and to refute the allegations made against them, notable members of the Mandaean community met with the Mandaean clergy to pressure them into accepting the need for a translation of a sacred text – the *Ginza Rabba* – from an archaic Mandaean dialect of Aramaic into Arabic. The clergy relented and a committee was formed in 1995. Hamid was a key member of the committee. Here, he explains how eventually the Mandaean community had to seek public recognition from the regime, and in particular from Saddam himself, to guarantee their protection:

Hamid: It [the faith campaign] was more about the Sunni mosques; they were the ones who were constructing such ideas. It was the Sunni

current that was putting forward ideas like that at the time. They had the loudest voice, because the government was also Sunni. So, they felt they were strengthened by this. So at that time, it was largely amongst the Sunnis that you would hear those kinds of words. Mostly in West and South Baghdad; in Doura, in areas like Bay'ā, in areas that were far from the centre- on the outskirts of Baghdad. In those areas, there were Mandaeanes who heard what they were saying. You know, on Fridays they use loudspeakers to deliver the sermon. The Mandaeanes would be sat at home being able to hear everything that the preacher would be saying. There would be sermons on Fridays where the preachers would say that the Sabeans are *kufār* (disbelievers) and they don't have a religion, they don't have a Prophet, they are *zanādiqa* (atheists). You can take their women, their homes, and their wealth – these [Mandaeanes] are not Muslims. However, we would inform the Ministry of Awqāf (religious endowments) what these preachers were saying, that such and such mosque on this date at this time with this particular preacher gave a sermon saying x, y and z. Then they would hold them to account. Some from the Awqaf would be in agreement with them, others sympathetic to us. You know, the employees of the Ministry of Awqāf themselves are preachers at mosques. It wasn't really until we had published the *Ginza Rabba* and gifted it to Saddam Hussein which got mass exposure on television in the news, that the issue came to an end [...] We wanted this meeting with Saddam because we knew that all the journalists and the television stations would be following it and that they would speak about the Mandaeanes. They would say that Mandaeanes are originally Iraqi and are good people, and everyone should respect them. After these words were broadcast on television, you couldn't find any [Muslim] cleric having the courage to say insulting words about the Mandaeanes.

According to Hamid, attacks on the Mandaean community came from areas in which there were mixed populations or where there were a significant number of Sunni Muslims. In light of the earlier discussion on the phenomenon of the re-tribalization of Iraqi society, albeit in a modern urban context, the extract above demonstrates that for Mandaeanes, being under the aegis of particular tribal groups in Baghdad was insufficient in the face of sectarian attacks. Recourse to the state for protection was required.

The faith campaign also impacted on other minorities in Iraq, notably the Christian community. The prohibition on selling alcohol disproportionately hit Christian businesses. At schools, religious instruction was inserted into the curriculum but covered Islam only. Mary, a 39 year old from Baghdad al-Jedida told me how constrained life had become for Christian communities in Iraq:

Mary: You know at the time of Saddam Hussein, there wasn't anything in particular for the Christian faith. Yes, there were some private schools where you could get a religious education but at state run schools there was nothing like that - it's nothing like it is in Syria. I mean, it was only really through the family you know that we'd get a religious education [...] It's not like it is here where, I don't know, children at the beginning of their primary education – they get some religious guidance. It's true that we had religious freedom in Iraq, I'm talking to you now about before the collapse of the regime, but it wasn't like here where they have huge celebrations and they practice their customs and ceremonies as and how they like, it wasn't like that. At the same time, there was no war on Christians – nothing like it has been in recent years I mean, after the fall [of the regime]. I mean we got on with our lives, I mean we weren't afforded a luxurious life or anything. It was pretty normal, we got by. That's what I mean. From what I've seen of the Christians here in Syria, how can I put it? They have rights. Nothing is kept from them.

Again we are reminded of the central importance of domestic spaces in nurturing religious dispositions. For many Iraqis - until the advent of the faith campaign - the familial home rather than school was where a religious education would be learned and passed on. Arriving in Syria had alerted Mary to just how difficult it was to find a conduit for religious expression in Iraq after the Iran-Iraq war. A generation had grown up believing that despite not being able to show an open display of religious commitment they enjoyed religious freedom. That this would culminate in the targeting of the Christian community was something that Mary had until then neither contemplated nor anticipated. Only through reflection on and the re-telling of past events is Mary able to re-frame those very same events; making obvious the dissonance between then and now (King 2000). In the context of forced migration, Taylor (2009:45-46) tells us this inability to anticipate leaves refugees “wonder(ing) how it was they didn't see their exile coming, couldn't be better prepared for it or be able to prevent it.”

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to provide the reader with an overview of the context which preceded the displacement of Iraqis from 2003 and onwards. I have made the argument that the seeds of displacement had already been sown as far back as the Iran-Iraq war. The memories of participants, recalled at the time of my interview with them, provide us with a particular representation of the

past. This is a past constructed from the standpoint of the present. Both my participants and I, in a dialogic process, provide the reader with the context to their displacement. By calling forth these particular articulations of past events, participants are making meaning of their present circumstance.

As a researcher interested in exploring how - if at all - forced migrants mobilise religious traditions in exile, I argue that we must first explore the genesis of a religious habitus. The testimonies of Sara and Aref point to the importance of home. It is in the comfort of the home that an embodied cultural capital or a religious habitus is nurtured. Sara reminds us she “was raised on knowing what is permissible and what is forbidden”. The rules of the game, the constraints on how to conduct social relations were set early in life. However, dispositions can change over time. Attitudes towards religious traditions, actors and institutions are subject to the interactions and experiences people have of them. Not all participants have shared the same experiences. Older respondents’ memories of recent events in Iraqi history from the Iran-Iraq war onwards, reveal an idealized or even imaginary notion of Iraq’s past as being untainted by communitarian politics, whereas for younger respondents religious belonging has long been a prism through which identity is negotiated in Iraq. The testimonies of H̄anan and Maḥmoud illustrate the differing contexts in which they had considered the idea of marriage. Maḥmoud was doing so at a time when progressive changes in the legal field of Iraq were underway which had direct repercussions on domestic understandings of religion. H̄anan, on the other hand, was considering marriage at a time when public space was increasingly imbued with religious and communitarian overtones.

The deprivation and degradation of Iraqi infrastructure as a result of sanctions also meant that the state began to seek out alternative societal structures to bolster its authority. Here, we began to see the re-emergence of tribal solidarities worked anew in an urban context. A corollary of this was an increasing conservatism. Once again we are reminded that changes in one field can filter through to other fields. The mobilisation of religious traditions cannot be considered in isolation, disregarding the context in which they are first mobilised. The rise in conservatism was accelerated by the state embarking on

its *ḥamla al-īmāniyeh* (faith campaign) to garner continued loyalty and support from a population that had increasingly developed a religious orientation to deal with the vicissitudes of life under the sanctions era. We were reminded in this chapter by Abu Fu'ad that the attempt by the state to mobilize religious resources did not pass by uncontested. His assertion that the faith campaign "had nothing to do with religion" demonstrates that contrary to Bourdieu's ideas on the laity merely passively consuming religious goods, the laity is actively engaged in a struggle with the state over the meaning of religious traditions.

A consequence of the faith campaign and its populist readings of Islam was that adherents of minority faiths such as the Mandaean and the Christians became visibly marked as "other". Questions of identity increasingly became more explicitly galvanised around notions of religious belonging. This proved to be an explosive mix when combined with an occupation that sought to play on sectarian differences to further American control over Iraq. The ensuing sectarian violence became a key trigger for the displacement of millions of Iraqis. In the following chapter, I consider the extent to which the experience of sectarianism coloured the attitudes of Iraqi forced migrants towards religious networks and institutions.



## Chapter Four

### The Un-mixing of Neighbourhoods

*“And when We made a covenant with you: You shall not shed your blood and you shall not turn your people out of your cities; then you gave a promise while you witnessed. Yet you it is who slay your people and turn a party from among you out of their homes, backing each other up against them unlawfully and exceeding the limits; and if they should come to you, as captives you would ransom them – while their very turning out was unlawful for you. Do you then believe in a part of the Book and disbelieve in the other? What then is the reward of such among you as do this but disgrace in the life of this world, and on the day of resurrection they shall be sent back to the most grievous chastisement, and Allah is not at all heedless of what you do.”*<sup>125</sup>

#### Introduction

This chapter provides both a more immediate context to the displacement of Iraqi refugees and a continuing analysis of the genesis and development of the religious habitus. To do so, I employ testimony of participants to assist understanding of key contexts in which ideas about religious discourse and practice have been and continue to be mobilised. As argued throughout this thesis, religion cannot be understood *sui generis*. Instead, it sits within a matrix of intersecting and mutually reinforcing fields. Religion is not merely a set of discrete doctrinal beliefs and practices but also provides a moral order which underpins social relationships. This underlying moral order is challenged when faced with social transformation of which forced migration and conflict can be both cause and consequence (Castles 2003). This chapter considers what happens to attitudes towards religion in the context of the changing dynamics brought about by sectarianism and the threat of displacement.

I argue in this chapter that sectarianism in Iraq, although set within the language of religious symbolism should be seen as a consequence of re-emerging tribal solidarities after the first Gulf War and the Ba'thist quelling of the Intifada

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<sup>125</sup>

The Noble Qur'an 2:84-85

Sha'abaniyah, rather than a practice of everyday “lived religion”. Drawing on testimonies of Iraqi refugees, I contend that a sectarian narrative is re-active and emerges from a political context rather than one which is produced from below. This is not to say that the religiosity<sup>126</sup> of an individual is not affected by changes in the political field but rather a sectarian narrative is produced in the field of politics whereas religiosity is located across a number of fields. This is addressed in greater depth in Chapter Five. In this chapter I remind the reader that the narratives studied in this thesis are complex interactions which blur the boundaries between the past and present. The movement of participants’ narratives back and forth in space and time between Iraq and Syria captures the ongoing development of the religious habitus of my respondents.

I also consider how the American occupation inculcated and exacerbated a sectarian politics in which formerly disenfranchised groups in marginalised districts of Baghdad sought to claim a stake in post-Saddam era Iraq. I draw the reader’s attention to how changes in the field of law – in particular, the de-ba’thification law and the dissolution of entities law impacted on the fields of religion and education. Exploring the experiences of minority groups such as Palestinian-Iraqis, Mandaeans, and Christians, I demonstrate that Baghdad was a site for the “un-mixing of neighbourhoods” as political actors sought to assert their authority by mobilising religious symbolism. I posit that the experience of sectarianism and the role played by clerics and religious institutions in the advancement of a sectarian discourse has coloured how Iraqi forced migrants in Damascus perceive religious actors and institutions resulting in what I call a “trust deficit”.

#### **4.1. Defining sectarianism**

In a study of 587 journal articles spanning three decades from 1978 onwards, Smilde & May (2010) point to the significance in sociological research on religion of “pro-religiousness” or the notion that religious practice and belief is positively correlated to well-being. While acknowledging that pro-religiousness

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<sup>126</sup> Charles Glock (1962) identifies five dimensions to religiosity: namely, experiential (emotions and feelings), ritualistic (religious behaviour or practice), ideological (beliefs), intellectual (knowledge of religious traditions), and consequential (effects of the former dimensions on the secular world).

is a plausible finding, they express concern that research may occlude findings which point to more negative outcomes. In this chapter, I address what is often deemed as a negative outcome of religious discourse and practice: aggressive sectarianism.<sup>127</sup>

How precise are labels such as Sunni and Shi'i as sociological categories? Faleh Abdul Jabar (2003b) insists they are not. Rather, he argues that these categories can be misleadingly reductive, overlooking the social and cultural diversity within them. Such categories, he tells us, form "a loose cultural designation, which may differentiate a certain group from another in religious terms but never specifies social, cultural (not to mention political) differentiated aspects within this 'group' itself" (Abdul Jabar 2003b:63) The reality is that spaces within which all-encompassing designations such as Sunni or Shi'i are found, are cut across by kin networks, professions and neighbourhood solidarities (Abdul Jabar 2003b:34). Simply put, to think of such sectarian identities under discrete monolithic headings is to ignore the fact that there are economic, social and political factors which cut across such cleavages. A Shi'i housewife from the well-to-do neighbourhood of Resafe in Baghdad may have more in common with a Sunni from the same neighbourhood than she would have with a co-religionist from Madinat al-Sadr.

What processes and conditions produced the increased salience of sectarian affiliation after the American invasion? As I have shown in Chapter One, the religious field is set within the wider field of power. It is openly contested by interested parties advancing particular positions within the overarching field of power. Both discourse and social space can be appropriated to advance these interests at the expense of "others" who become subjugated, dominated and excluded. In Bourdeuian terms, the religious field provides a key site for battles over cultural, economic and symbolic capital. When identity is reduced to primordial notions of religious belonging, sectarianism emerges as the prism through which everyday relations and happenings are experienced, producing a

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<sup>127</sup> Fanar Haddad (2011:26) differentiates between aggressive and assertive sectarianism. The former relates to the symbolic or even physical denigration of the "other" whereas the latter is concerned with a highly visible presence of a sect's symbolism and practices in the public space.

set of distinctive processes and practices. Max Weiss (2010:15), writing on the Shi'i experience of modernity in Lebanon, reminds us that sectarianism "has depended and continues to depend upon routinized forms of cultural and social practice, and historians and social scientists should more carefully consider how sectarianism is produced, how it evolves, and how it spreads into the nooks and crannies of everyday life." Following Weiss, I examine the memories of everyday life for Iraqi forced migrants, considering how their encounter with sectarianism coloured their attitudes towards religious actors and institutions.

Sectarianism in Iraq did not emerge overnight nor was it expressed in a uniform manner. It has developed as part of a long process which should be scrutinized contextually. Fanar Haddad (2011:10) identifies four primary antecedents to help explain the mobilisation of sectarian identities in the struggle for power following the collapse of the Ba'athist regime: foreign influence, economic competition, competing myth-symbol complexes<sup>128</sup> and the contested cultural ownership of the nation. The complexities of sectarian politics in the region go beyond the remit of this thesis and much has been written elsewhere (Al-Bayati 1997, Makdisi 1996, 2000, Weiss 2010, Haddad 2011). The issue I wish to address here is the way in which sectarianism bears upon the lives of Iraqi forced migrants. In particular, I draw attention to how it shapes attitudes towards religious networks and institutions.

Sectarianism has been a feature of the contemporary Iraqi political landscape ever since the drawing up of a new constitution following the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, privileging Sunni elites over other groups (Al-Bayati 1997:31-38). I focus, however, on the period during which battles over symbolic and cultural understandings of religion in the Islamic world intensified – namely from the Iranian Revolution in 1979 onwards.<sup>129</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter,

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<sup>128</sup> Kaufman (2001:25) contends that the myth-symbol complex lies at the heart of ethnic identities. He tells us it is "the combination of myths, memories, values and symbols that defines not only who is a member of the group but what it means to be a member. The existence, status and security of the group thus come to be seen to depend on the status of group symbols, which is why people are willing to die for them".

<sup>129</sup> Ali al-Mu'min (2007:128) suggests that this is perhaps a good point of departure to understand the phenomenon of communitarian politics in Iraq; tracing the emergence of a vehemently anti-Shi'i discourse coming out of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf with a view to discredit the nascent Islamic Republic of Iran.

this served to conflate an anti-Iranian sentiment with an anti-Shi'i sentiment, resulting in the forced deportations of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi-Shi'i (Babakhan 2002:183), and mass arrests of Shi'i activists and students (Chubin and Tripp 1988:27).

#### **4.2. Tribal solidarities re-visited.**

Aggressive sectarianism became more entrenched after the American occupation, as US troops sought to assert control over Iraq, subduing some kin-affiliated networks while seeking to co-opt others. It is important to note here also that the *ḥamlā al-īmāniyeh* (the faith campaign) was in part attributable to recognition of the growing salience of tribal solidarities. Networks of patronage based on kinship and clan identities had become a key feature of Iraqi politics, effectively forming a "shadow state" (Tripp, 2002) which did not collapse with the capture and subsequent death of Saddam Hussein. Despite the downfall of the Ba'thist regime, these networks remained intact and in the early stages of the American occupation were typified by the area North West of Baghdad known as "The Sunni Triangle", where insurgency was strongest. Indeed, it has been argued that the model of the "shadow state" was fully resuscitated in the political processes of the new Iraq with fatal consequences for the Iraqi people (Tripp 2007:306). In more recent years, American forces looked to co-opt some of these tribal networks into the Sunni-led "Awakening Councils" as an important component of its strategy against Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (International Crisis Group 2008).

Conflation of tribalism with religious belonging results in sectarian practices. The doyen of Iraqi sociology, Ali al-Wardi (2005:6), has argued that sectarianism is more an expression of tribal solidarity than a religious practice: sect becomes tribe. Many of the inhabitants of marginalised and disenfranchised districts were originally Shi'i migrants from the South of Iraq: re-emergence of tribal solidarities in conjunction with the Ba'thist regime practice of rewarding loyal tribes with a system of material privileges promoted a struggle for economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Long-standing regional rivalries between Shi'i dominated provinces South of Baghdad and Central Iraq were reconfigured into a conflict between those who were deemed to benefit

from the patronage of the state and those who had been excluded (Visser 2008b, Haddad 2011). Economic and social marginalization on the periphery of Baghdad was intensified in the 1990s with the arrival of a newly displaced population from the South of the country. The Government mandated destruction of livelihoods and communities of the Marsh Arabs in the South<sup>130</sup> and the quelling of the Intifada Sha'abaniyah or what has commonly come to be known as the Shi'i uprising in March 1991, resulting in the dispossession and displacement of a significant number of Shi'i to overcrowded and poor neighbourhoods such as Fudhayliya and Madinat al-Thawra, latterly renamed Madinat as-Sadr.

The Intifada Sha'abaniyah should be recognised as a key point in the contest for control over religious symbolism (Haddad 2011). Slogans such as *ma ku wali illa 'Ali, wa nreed hakim Ja'afari* (there is no protector other than 'Ali and we want Ja'afari rule) reverberated around the Shi'i heartland of the South and beyond in 1991. These were met with a muted response from non-Shi'i Iraqis who equated such slogans with the threatening ascendancy of a theocratic Shi'i state modelled on Iran.<sup>131</sup> The Ba'thist regime responded with a characteristic, brutal and indiscriminate campaign violating key symbols and sanctuaries held sacred by Shi'i across the world including the shrine of 'Ali in Najaf and the shrines of Hussein and Abbas in Karbala (Haddad 2011:73). The message was clear; the regime alone firmly controlled the production of religious symbolism.

Displacements that resulted from the attack on majority Shi'i provinces of the South produced further disenfranchisement of urban poor who had originally settled in Baghdad in the late 1950s. Conditions and prospects of social mobility for the multitudes in these neighbourhoods were exceedingly bleak. By 2003, the label *Shrūgi* (pl. *shrūg*), which had long been used pejoratively for this social underclass, was increasingly imbued with fear. Inhabitants of more affluent suburbs began to envision them as an "unruly mob" (Harling 2010). Chatelard

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<sup>130</sup> The Ba'thist regime considered this to be a necessary measure to deny enemy combatants an accessible route to infiltrate the country. Author's interview with Iraqi refugee, Damascus, March 2011.

<sup>131</sup> Muwaffaq al-Rubaie, a spokesperson for Hizb al-Da'wa, sought to downplay such fears. He insisted: "Our message to the whole world is that this is not a Shi'a revolt" cited in Fisk, Robert, 'Iraqi Opposition Groups Question US intentions', *The Independent*, 11 May 1991.

(2011) observes that “[t]he number of *shruqis* [sic.] kept growing in the cities and at least in the imagination of those who have been casting them as barbarian Others, now form the majority of the recruits of the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia”.<sup>132</sup> This view was echoed by one of my participants, Adnan, a Shi’a whose neighbourhood came under the control of JAM. He referred to them as *hothalet al mujtama’* (the dregs of society). He told me:

Adnan: [They are] people who pedal old wares on animals and carts. They take empty cans, bottles and trash. They push carts in vegetable markets. They carry things in the souq. I’m not saying this to degrade the work they do. No. But they aren’t known for having any culture, any knowledge and they are ignorant. [Am I] right or wrong? When these religious currents like JAM, Hizb al-Islami and al-Qaeda appeared, these people became mercenaries. They would kill people for as little as \$50. What logic is this? Who murders? Why don’t you kill? Why didn’t I kill? God knows [...] So, when you ask me why I left home, [the answer is] I was living in a Shi’i area and the JAM is made up of Shi’i and they [JAM] are the dregs of society.

Here, Adnan has internalised the Ba’thist state discourse of the Intifada Sha’abaniyah. Prior to the collapse of the regime Adnan had been a state employee, like many other Iraqis. He lived in a new settlement in Hayy al-Jihad, a prosperous district of Baghdad close to the airport far from the *shrūg* of Madinat al-Thawra. Iraqis living in the central provinces around Baghdad had been shielded from the true extent of the annihilation of the Iraqi military on the Kuwait-Iraq border and the ensuing uprising. In 1991, there were no social media and al-Jazeera broadcasts. Much of the news Baghdadis received on what had happened in the South was either through personal contact or restricted state media sources. Through state controlled media, a picture of the uprising was portrayed in which the Shi’i of Southern Iraq were depicted as *al-ghawgha’a* (the mob). The Ba’th party mouthpiece, Al-Thawra daily newspaper, ran a series of anonymously penned articles over a two week period in April 1991 in which blame for the unrest was laid squarely at the door of agitating Shi’i. The articles were unprecedented in that Saddam’s regime could be seen

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<sup>132</sup> The Jaysh al-Mahdi militia was not the only militia operating in Iraq at the time. The SCIRI backed Badr Corps had largely infiltrated the Ministry of Interior and was absorbed into local police units, and has been accused of operating ‘death squads’ targeting Sunnis. *Tandhim al-Qa’ida fi Balad al-Rafidayn* or al-Qa’ida’s Organisation in Mesopotamia headed by Abu Musab az-Zarqawi claimed responsibility for a number of attacks on Shi’is (International Crisis Group 2006a:14-18).

openly advocating a sectarian discourse; Shi'i identity - particularly that of the marsh-dwellers from the South of Iraq - and Shi'i rituals were mocked and attacked as being regressive, retrograde, of foreign origin (meaning Iran) and prone to religious extremism. A moral panic was manufactured in which the *shrūg* were cast as folk-devils. Residents of Baghdad were informed in no uncertain terms by al-Thawra that the masses of the newly arrived migrants to the capital were not like them. The un-named author opines:

“[T]he son of Baghdad will notice examples of her [a woman from the marshes] rummaging in the garbage of the capital. Let no one think or delude themselves into thinking, that such behaviour is based on, and motivated by, a desire to satisfy urgent material needs. This sort of people owns much more than is owned by some generous souls that do not lower themselves to despicable behaviour” (cited in Haddad 2011:125)

Casting new migrants from the South of Iraq in the role of folk devils allowed Baghdadis to imagine the *shrūg* as people whose morals were not the same as theirs. The implication is that the perpetrators of the violence visited upon Baghdad were without *akhlāq* (ethics) and hence without religion. Adnan was not alone in suggesting this. Mu'tasim told me that in spite of the state having a considerable security apparatus in the city he had been afraid to enter the densely packed streets of Madinat al-Sadr alone prior to the invasion let alone after, adding “you couldn't vouch for the faces around you [...] their faces were of criminals not people”. Other respondents, irrespective of which faith community they belonged to, voiced similar opinions. George, a 58 year old Assyrian Christian from Doura in Baghdad had spent much of his working life conscripted in the army. He had left school at the age of 14 to help his father in a small family run bakery which sold flat Iraqi bread. Later he found work in a cement factory. Like many poor Iraqis, George was forced to sell household possessions to make ends meet during the sanctions era preceding the invasion. I asked him what he remembered about the time following the American invasion in 2003. He told me:



George: I was still in Doura. I just remember it being like a volcanic eruption. A person couldn't go to the bank, or to the stores, it just wasn't safe there was no culture, no religion. I mean religion is meant to control and provide order. For example, you're raised on certain traditions – these traditions which you are raised on whether you are Christian or Muslim, if you are raised on those true traditions, then what happened would not have happened. They would go and break into this store and that bank. What does the church teach you? What does the mosque teach you? It teaches you to be pious, to meet your duties and to be conscious of the things which you do. I mean we were being colonised – what does that require you to do? Does it mean to go and destroy what is around you? But those who have a conscience and are aware of what is happening – they protect their wealth. They don't allow these things to happen. What you had in Iraq was rioting and killing. At six in the evening there wouldn't be a single soul on the streets. The area I was living in was Sunni, and young Shi'i men would come and start firing. God most high doesn't accept that which is wrong. Islam is supposed to be one. But, there, people who didn't have a brain between them were doing these kinds of things. Life became hard.

George corroborates Adnan's labelling of the militias and their supporters as “the dregs of society” in his assertion that those without “true traditions” were responsible for the violence and lawlessness. For George, to be religious means to be cultured and religious institutions are viewed by George as guarantors of order and stability. Here, George is telling me that in spite of the teachings and efforts of religious institutions there was disorder and instability. His memory of those events fits into normative accounts of rioting wherein rioters are depicted as mindless thugs or as George puts it: “people who didn't have a brain between them”; the violence serves no purpose. Many of my respondents referred to the events following the occupation as being *fawdawī* (anarchic).

However, a normative reading of the events such as the one narrated by George conceals the structural inequalities of Iraqi society. Almost a quarter of Baghdad's population resides in Madinat al-Sadr (Batatu 1986). Transport and utilities infrastructure connecting Madinat al-Sadr to the rest of Baghdad were minimal. Literacy levels were low and healthcare provision poor. George's memory of communal violence “being like a volcanic eruption” is telling. It intimates that the violence had come as a surprise yet simultaneously concedes that tensions had been simmering and building for a while. However, at no point

in my conversation with either Adnan or George did they articulate what these unaddressed grievances were. Their different socio-economic backgrounds – Adnan, a middle class, Shi'i, university educated professional and George, an unemployed Christian with no experience of higher education - testifies to the pervasive reach of the moral panic manufactured by the Ba'thist regime concerning the *shrūg* into the imaginations of many Baghdadis, transcending both class and religious affiliations. The following section explores how past grievances were brought once more to the fore by the American occupation of Iraq.

#### **4.3. Foreign culpability**

By 2006, Iraq had become a powder keg primed to explode as a fragmented communal and sectarian politics gave rise to the proliferation of heavily armed units across the country; some representing the state security forces, others forming militias attached to political currents, battling one another and a growing resistance to the occupation. The American neo-liberal project of a New Iraq had managed to create near laboratory conditions for sectarian conflict that fully ignited at Samarā in 2006; conditions “in which socio-political/cultural differences and divisions entrenched by colonialism have re-emerged; in which competing factions struggle for control over what remains of state resources; and in which insecurity and conflict produce repeated crises of mass displacement” (Marfleet 2007a:400).

My participants confirm Al-Khalidi and Tanner's (2006) findings that aggressive sectarianism and violence accompanying the resistance to American occupation were key drivers of general instability in the country which resulted in their displacement. However, they also recognize that the heavy footprint of the American occupation itself was pivotal in igniting sectarian conflict. Tariq, an administrator at the Rābeta, likened Iraqi society to a ball of cotton wool. He told me: “inside [this ball of cotton wool] is a branch of thorns. America and Britain wanted to rip out the branch of thorns. When they did this, the cotton separated and tore apart. They [America and Britain] are the ones who brought these sectarian identities to the fore.”

Tariq's metaphor is an insightful one which captures the visceral tearing apart of the fabric of society. It recognises that sectarian identities prior to the American invasion had been a sensitive issue; handling required care. Grabbing blindly at the ball of cotton wool would only serve to cause harm. Though it was apparent that the regime had employed sectarian discourse and practice to maintain its grip on power, legitimate complaints of the Shi'i community were not addressed. Indifference shown by non-Shi'i Iraqis to the Intifada Sha'abaniyah helped nurture a sense of grievance among Shi'i Iraqis. While Saddam concentrated his efforts on courting tribal support through the *ḥamla al-īmāniyeh*, the Shi'i faithful were still denied the right to commemorate important rituals such as 'Ashūra and Arba'īn.

In addition to the wide-ranging economic de-construction carried out by the governing Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) (Klein 2007, Chandrasekaran 2007, Marfleet 2007, 2010b), the political structures of society were also targeted. For the CPA, Iraq was to be considered "a *tabula rasa* (on which) they could reconstruct as they wished" (Cockburn, 2006:70). The first two directives issued under the CPA: Order number 1, De-Ba'thification of Society, and Order number 2, Dissolution of Entities, effectively tore down the institutional structures of the previous regime including key government ministries and the military adding to the swelling numbers of unemployed that had already reached around 70% (Marfleet, 2010a). This was a move that even took the commanding forces on the ground by surprise – they had been expecting Iraqi forces to be involved in the reconstruction effort. The ramifications of this executive order were not lost on some sections of the American military which by 2007 were fully engaged with fighting a growing armed resistance.<sup>133</sup> This was made up of many disparate groups across the many different faith communities in Iraq. Some signed up with various Shi'i militias including the Sadrist-led Jaysh al-Mahdi and the armed wing of the Iranian backed SCIRI- the Badr Corps. As the Iraqi political scene became increasingly sectarian, Shi'i

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A point conceded by Colonel Thomas Hammes, who told the flagship PBS documentary series, Frontline: "Now you have a couple of hundred thousand people who are armed - because they took their weapons home with them - who know how to use the weapons, who have no future [and] have a reason to be angry with you."

militia groups - particularly the Badr Corps - were incorporated into the state security apparatus.<sup>134</sup>

In addition, the CPA established local councils founded along sectarian lines. Each council was made up of representatives from each religious community. The Americans had pushed for a power sharing arrangement between the Kurds, the Sunna and the Shi'a. The encouragement of sectarian politics by the Americans led to establishment of the Iraqi transitional government. Ibrahim al-Ja'afari became Prime Minister heading *al-I'tilāf al-'Irāqī al-Muwaḥḥad* (the United Iraqi Alliance) – a coalition of the major Shi'i parties including Hizb al-Dawa, SCIRI and the Sadrist current. Key ministries were apportioned along sectarian lines with the Americans maintaining vigilance over oil production. For ordinary Iraqis, this was a portent of things yet to come. Abu Fu'ad told me:

Abu Fu'ad: It was clear what kind of ministries we were going to have. It was clear that they were formed along sectarian lines built under the guidance of the Americans, not through the choice of Iraqi citizens. They were appointed before by the Americans. The Americans are directly responsible for the sectarianism that engulfed Iraq – America and Iran. Ja'afari made most of his position as Prime Minister and brought in Solagh, I don't know if you've heard of him, as Minister of the Interior. He was the one who started building the security forces around sectarian identity. That's why the security forces, the police force and the armed forces were mostly Shi'i. Some of the officers, that were quite high ranking due to their experience, were Sunni and that's why the campaign [targeting them] started.

To better illustrate the slow-burn of the sectarian flame in Iraq, the following section explores how different minority groups came to be targeted in the sectarian conflict during the American occupation.

#### **4.4. Easy targets**

##### **4.4a. Palestinian Iraqis**

As we saw earlier in the case of the *ḥamla al-īmāniyeh*, the promulgation of Islamic “norms” through state policy under Saddam's regime had served to ossify sectarian identities. For groups such as Palestinian-Iraqis who lived close

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<sup>134</sup> Early into the American occupation the Badr brigade began its campaign of targeted assassinations of Ba'thist Iraqi air force officers. This campaign of targeted assassinations continued across even into Syria where an ex-officer was murdered in Jaramana.

to the disenfranchised Shi'i communities of what is now Madinat al-Sadr, this process arguably began as early as the onset of the Iran-Iraq war. Earlier in Chapter Three we saw how Palestinian-Iraqis were singled out as not being native sons of the country and their involvement in the Iran-Iraq war was resented in some quarters – casting Palestinian-Iraqis in the role of mercenaries for Saddam. The invasion of Kuwait also helped blur the lines between the Palestinian issue and the realities of life for Palestinian Iraqis. Playing the “Arab card” during the war with Iran, Saddam sought to re-fashion himself as the Salah ed-Din of the modern era by championing the Palestinian cause and using it as a justification for the legitimacy of Ba'thist rule. The powerful imagery of the stone throwing youth of the first Palestinian intifada of 1987 was presented in a religious idiom to galvanise the morale of Iraqi troops on the front line of the war. A poem entitled “I shall throw stones in our Name, O Saddam” by Adib Nasr illustrates this point:

The missile bursts forth,  
The missile bursts forth,  
And I shall throw stones in the name of Allah,  
And I shall throw stones in the name of Jerusalem [al-Quds, the Holy]  
And I shall throw stones in your name, Oh Saddam,  
I am faith,  
I am flint,  
I am stones from the walls of Jerusalem,  
(Thrown) at Tehran.  
(cited in Bengio 2002:197)

In a detailed survey of the speeches and public statements made by Saddam Hussein at the time, Orfa Bengio (1998) reveals that the use of the Palestinian motif had reached a peak in the wake of the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The Ba'thist regime had, at the time, couched the upcoming conflict with America and her allies in religious terms, with the liberation of the holy cities of Islam as

a key objective.<sup>135</sup> Abu Fu'ad recalls the particular impact of the invasion of Kuwait on the Palestinian community in Iraq and how both Iraqi state policy and regional Palestinian factions disregarded the lived realities of Palestinian-Iraqis while celebrating the Palestinian cause. He told me how despite the Ba'thist regime's instrumental use of the Palestinian cause, a series of decrees was issued against Palestinian-Iraqis prohibiting travel and the ownership of property and cars. In addition, the regime employed the services of a network of Palestinian informants in other Arab countries to report on the activities of dissident Iraqi figures living abroad. I asked him whether this had served to further strengthen the perception that the Palestinian-Iraqis by association were Saddam loyalists:

Abu Fu'ad: Look, if you remember the Intifada Sha'abaniyah, when this broke out, people said that the Palestinians enlisted themselves to fight for Saddam Hussein and put this uprising down. In reality, nothing like this happened. The sectarian elements pointed to this in order to intensify the rancour and hostility towards Palestinians, and to muddy the reputation of Palestinians so that people thought that we were Saddamists. This had a huge impact. This generated a reaction against Palestinians. Despite the fact, that we were a part of the Intifada Sha'abaniyah. No Palestinian sided with Saddam during that uprising. The only guilt they had was the same as any Iraqi who belonged to the Hizb al-Ba'th. There were lots of people who didn't like Saddam and belonged to the Ba'th. It was no more or no less than that. As far as we were concerned, this was an internal matter for Iraqis to sort out. When those declarations were made by Saddam on the issue of Palestine, Iraqis would look on it as Palestinians were profiting out of it. This intensified the hatred and the muddying of the Palestinian reputation.

Lena Jayussi, writing on the modalities of Palestinian memory, suggests the act of recalling not only links the present to the past but also to the future. As such, there ought to be recognition of the fact that the act of agency is inherently involved in remembering, recalling, re-presenting and re-framing memories. She tells us:

This is not merely the past viewed through the present, but the present experienced as given, shaped through and by the past, the latter still

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<sup>135</sup> The naming of Iraqi ballistic missiles at the time further illustrates how the imagery of the Palestinian struggle was appropriated by the regime. One missile was named *al-hijarah al-sarūkh* or the stone that is a missile (Bengio 1998:199).

working its way, its consequences into the present. The past as unfinished, This is a particularly social conception of time [...] the time of social agents working their plans, visions, and desires, appending the present to the past, potentially mortgaging the future. (Jayussi 2007:118)

The interviews with Abu Fu'ad were conducted in the course of nine separate meetings which began in late December 2010 and continued until the beginning of March 2011. A lot can change in a very short space of time. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi,<sup>136</sup> a vegetable seller in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia lit the fuse to what have arguably been the largest uprisings of the “Arab street” since Gamal Abdel-Nasr took on the might of British imperialism at Suez. Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain were quick to follow the example set by Tunisia, as hundreds of thousands took to the streets demanding bread, liberty and social justice.

At the time of interviewing Abu Fu'ad, the tension in Syria was palpable. Taxi drivers who had never spoken a word of politics were quick to elicit the views of their passengers. The phrases *Allah yfarrej 'alayhun* (May God give them relief) and *Suriya Allah ḥamyha* (May God protect Syria) were on the tongues of all I met. Iraqi refugees were thinking ahead to where such events could lead. Tariq at the Rābeta looked on warily at these events. “We'll see how long it is before they start bringing out statistics on the demographics of Syria. Once they start doing that you know where things are heading” he told me one afternoon while discussing what the Arab Spring might mean for the Palestinian struggle. The flat screen television on the wall at the Palestinian Iraqi Community Association was permanently tuned in to either al-Arabiyya or al-Jazeera satellite channels. Palestinian-Iraqis gathered at the centre would look on with a great deal of nervousness and trepidation. What if the same were to happen in Syria? Would Palestinians be made to be scapegoats once again? In recalling the shift in societal attitudes towards Palestinians that came in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, Abu Fu'ad is re-framing events with an eye firmly set on changes that were

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For an account of the events that led to the tragic death of Mohamed Bouaziz see Sedra P (2011) “Manoubia and her Son”, *Jadaliyya* [online] 8 October 2011, Available at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2825/manoubia-and-her-son>

unfolding before us in other Arab countries, making it clear that the Palestinians in Syria would be best served by keeping to the sidelines.

Returning to events in Iraq, we must bear in mind that the concerted effort of Iraqi militias to target Palestinian-Iraqis should be seen in several contexts. First, we must consider the Ba'thist mobilisation of religious symbolism and the formation of an Islamic resistance against the American occupation by former Ba'thists. Second, we must take into account the increasing presence of sectarian-minded Salafists in Iraq. Attacks on Shi'i civilians by *Tandhim Al-Qa'ida fi Balad al-Rāfidayn* (Organisation of Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia) had produced calls from Muqtada al-Sadr for what he termed *takfir al-takfiriyyin* or the excommunication of the excommunicators (International Crisis Group 2006b:15); a reference to the Salafists, pejoratively called the Wahabbis, who had begun to establish themselves in Iraq during the 1990's.<sup>137</sup> A further problem for Palestinians was the perception that they were both Saddam loyalists and Salafists. As a result they were marked by Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) as a legitimate target.<sup>138</sup>

The basis for Muqtada al-Sadr's legitimacy as a spokesperson for marginalised Shi'i communities does not rest with the traditional system of the *marja'iya* from which Shi'i clerics have wielded control over symbolic, material and organisational resources (Motahari 2001, Abdul-Jabar 2002). Instead, Muqtada al-Sadr has elevated his charismatic credentials over and above those who enjoy traditional authority (International Crisis Group 2006b:18). A salient outcome of this is that although Muqtada al-Sadr continues to act in the capacity of *marja*, his capacity to amass revenue streams through the collection of *khums* and other charitable donations ultimately derives from the most marginalised and disenfranchised sector of the Iraqi Shi'i populace. Consequently, followers including those in JAM are given free rein in raising their own finances, with the outcome that conflation of Palestinian Iraqis as both

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<sup>137</sup> Author's interview with Palestinian-Iraqi refugee, Damascus, January 2011

<sup>138</sup> For the Jaysh al-Mahdi it is legally permitted in accordance with a fatwa allegedly attributed to Muhammad Sadiq as-Sadr to execute a *nawasib*, or one who hates the Twelver Shi'i Imams. In addition, it is also permissible for the appropriation of property belonging to *takfiriyyin*. See International Crisis Group (2006b) *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, Middle East report No. 55.



Saddam loyalists and as Salafists meant that targeting Palestinians and the appropriation of their property was legitimized by Sadrists for raising funds or for the resettlement of internally displaced Shi'a from mixed or Sunni neighbourhoods in Baghdad. Abu Yaseen explained to me how Palestinian-Iraqis came to be viewed as Salafists:

Abu Yaseen: The few Palestinian families that lived in my area, even during the time of Saddam Hussein, had nothing to do with the Ba'thists or with Wahabbis. Even though the nearest mosque to our house was a Sunni mosque which had lots of Wahabbis praying there, we'd prefer to go to a mosque further away; the mosque of Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī. They [my Shi'i neighbours] knew this. I had been to Najaf and Karbala. They knew this. It was mostly Iraqi Sunnis that would pray at the mosque where there were Wahabbis. Some Palestinians would too. But, they [Palestinians] would be there not because they were Wahabbis but because it was the nearest mosque to their homes. As a result they were labelled as Wahabbis. Similarly, it was why they [Shi'i neighbours] saw me as someone who was clean. So, they'd ask me why I didn't pray in that mosque and I'd say I didn't like to and they would say 'yeah, we know you. You don't like Wahabbis; you're clean people'.

Earlier in the week, before interviewing Abu Yaseen, he and I had prayed the *Zuhr* lunch time prayer together in the main hall of the Rābeta. Abu Yaseen noticed that I had performed my prayer in the Salafi manner.<sup>139</sup> This had led to some confusion as through our conversations and my dress and behaviour code, it was clear that I did not entirely ascribe to Salafi thought and practice. Abu Yaseen's pejorative use of the label *Wahabi* as opposed to Sunni was used to mark Salafist religious practices as markedly different to his. The mentioning of the mosque of Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī was similarly a marker to me that Abu Yaseen identified with Sufi readings of Islam. Equally, his visit to Najaf and Karbala would be considered anathema for Salafists. His assertion that he was regarded as "clean" by Shi'i neighbours sits in juxtaposition to the reality of having been compelled to leave Iraq by virtue of being targeted by Shi'i militias. Abu Yaseen is also asking the retrospective question of why he had been targeted. Much like Abu Fu'ad's reminiscence of the Intifada Sha'abaniyah, Abu

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<sup>139</sup> Salafism is a particular current in Islam that asserts authenticity of ideas and practice in relation to the *Salaf* (pious predecessors) or the early Muslims. Authenticity is adhered to particularly in matters of creed and performance of religious rituals. Men who ascribe to Salafist ideals usually pay particular attention to details such as physical appearance. Thus men will normally have beards, a trimmed moustache and wear their trousers or robes above ankle length. All of which is in accordance with the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad as related in ahadīth literature.

Yaseen is absolving himself of any wrong-doing towards the marginalised and disenfranchised Shi'i who were formerly his neighbours. For Palestinian-Iraqis the memory and post-memory of the *Nakba* figures strongly in their narrative of events in Iraq. The telling and re-telling of the events that led to the dispossession of Palestinians and their forcible displacement from their ancestral lands posit the Palestinians as a people against whom a great injustice had been done. Abu Yaseen's visits to the Shi'i shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala demonstrate a particular solidarity amongst people who felt they had been wronged. It also demonstrates a conversance with the teaching of the Shi'i cleric Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr<sup>140</sup> who had encouraged the Shi'a and the Sunna to pray in one another's mosques (Haddad 2011:113). The immensely popular appeal of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr among Shi'i – cutting across class cleavages – meant that a Palestinian visiting the shrine cities would be seen as following the teachings of a senior Shi'i cleric.

However, Iraqi-Shi'i perceptions of Palestinian-Iraqis were not simply based on daily interactions between members of both groups; wider narratives were deployed to structure relationships. Geopolitical alliances in the region had resulted in Iraq becoming the battleground for regional supremacy between Iran and the American-Saudi alliance. A new "great game" was afoot. Whereas military responsibility for the occupation was shouldered by the Americans and the British, the Saudi regime continued to contest the religious symbolism of Iraq, wary of the ascendancy of the Iranian-backed cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Iraqi respondents who had ties to the South of the country were quick to confirm this. Hamid, the Mandaean representative of the Council of Minorities in Iraq, told me "everything in Iraq goes through Iran. I heard three days ago, the Minister of Education went to Karbala and found schools being run on an Iranian language curriculum. I don't know how true this is, but what I do know is that towns like Najaf, Karbala and Basra – they're full of Iranians." Similarly

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<sup>140</sup> Father of Muqtada al-Sadr. The Ba'thist regime had sought to capitalise on having an Arab Marja in place following the death of Ayatollah Abu Qasim al-Khoei in 1992. His rise to prominence coincided with the state's decision to pursue a more relaxed policy regarding the role of religion in public life. This allowed for the establishment of charities organised through the offices of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr in deprived areas such as Madinat al-Sadr. In return, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's public position offered a semblance of legitimacy to the Ba'thist regime.

Hanan, herself from Basra, echoed this sentiment telling me in hushed tones of how following the American invasion property in Basra's premier shopping street was being bought up by "unfamiliar faces- people we didn't know. There were people from al-'Amara and Nassiriya, and there were some from Iran."

To mount a challenge to Shi'i cultural hegemony in the religious field, satellite broadcasting of religious programming filled the Iraqi airwaves. One such religious channel was Qanat Safa al-Fada'iya (Safa Satellite Channel). Broadcasting through Nile Sat from Egypt, this Gulf-based channel, which often hosts Salafi preachers, consistently launches virulent attacks on the Shi'i creed and religious figures. The tagline reads *bil tawhīd tṣafu ḥayatak* (purify your life with monotheism). By calling into question foundational aspects of the Shi'i creed and launching personal attacks on Shi'i clergy, the Safa channel - much like the writer of Al-Thawra articles following the Intifada Sha'abaniyah – was prominent in the battle for supremacy over religious symbolism in Iraq. The consequences for the Palestinian-Iraqi community were terrifying, augmenting the suspicions of sectarian-minded Shi'i that the Palestinian-Iraqis were Salafists. The targeting of mosques and homes became a frighteningly common occurrence.

The Safa channel continues to impose itself from outside Iraq on the lives of Palestinian-Iraqis in Syria, causing much consternation. On the anniversary of Saddam Hussein's execution, the channel had planned to air a programme entitled *Falastiniyun al-'Iraq: Ḥanaq al-Ṣahyūni al-Shi'i* (Palestinian-Iraqis: Zionist Shi'i Hatred). The day before the programme was scheduled to air, the management committee of the Rābeta in Mukhayim al-Yarmouk had frantically been trying to get the channel to pull the programme off the air. "Why was the programme being aired at this precise moment?" They asked. Abu al-Hassan and Tariq saw the programme as being nothing other than an attempt to sully the name of Palestinian Iraqis; entrenching what they regarded as an outright fabrication – the idea that they were Saddam loyalists who opposed the Iraqi Shi'i as much as they opposed the Zionist occupiers of Palestine. "It's nonsense." Tariq told me, "the title of the programme tells you all you need to know. The use of the term 'Zionist-Shi'i'- apart from being incompatible; one is a

creed the other a political ideology – it's just plain stupid.” Letters had been dispatched by the Rābeta committee to the channel and a statement posted on the Rābeta's website condemning and refuting the idea of a Zionist-Shi'i conspiracy against the Palestinians. As had been the case with Saddam's instrumental use of the Palestinian issue, this was yet another example of how external influence (this time from the Gulf) would have severe ramifications for a beleaguered Palestinian Iraqi community in Baghdad.

#### 4.4b. Christians

Purging of the former Ba'thist order by the American occupying forces was interpreted by militias on both sides of the sectarian divide as a green light to openly contest cultural ownership of the nascent state. Much like the CPA, they wished to mould Iraq in their own image. Whereas the Ba'thist regime had originally been avowedly secular, the political forces in the ascendant were now organised along narrow communitarian lines. For the soon-to-be inheritors of the Iraqi state, religious minorities were a reminder of a particular brand of religious pluralism promoted by the former regime which was at the expense of the Shi'i majority. As such, purging of the *ancien régime* also provided an opportunity to target minority groups (Ali 2011).

As with other minority faith groups the Christian community in Iraq was not under the protection of any militia, thus they represented an easy target for both militias and organised gangs. Anonymous death threats aimed at intimidating home-owners into abandoning their properties were commonplace as was kidnapping of relatives and family members in order to extort a ransom. Threats were not only targeted at individuals but also at institutions. Churches particularly were targeted. As the number of threats targeting the Christian community mounted a general sense of fear and intimidation compelled many to seek refuge. Mary decided after the targeting of her local church that the possibility to lead a life in Baghdad free from the fear of persecution was no longer possible:

Mary: I remember on one day in the summer of 2004 a number of churches were attacked on the same day. In all honesty this frightened us, we could see that they [gangs and militias] had started to target us

and then we decided that we had to migrate and get out of Iraq. I remember that someone had thrown some leaflets at our church demanding that the church pay a sum of money and if it failed to do so, the church would be blown up. There were a number of threats like this and not just on the churches. I remember when I'd walk to the church in the evening when the church was having an event, it wasn't very far from where I lived, I'd be afraid and I'd want to quickly return to my home. It's not like it is here, where you can take your time and there is no fear, there is safety and security. It was a kind of deep fear, when the electricity would be cut off it became more uncomfortable. The whole day you would have to survive without electricity and you had to rely on generators. It was difficult, really. I don't know how we stayed for that time after the collapse [of the regime] God alone knows.

Simon's church had also been targeted. Along with other men from his community, he took turns in guarding the church and keeping watch for unfamiliar faces and vehicles in the neighbourhood. The appearance of strangers would elicit much anxiety and fear. With the change in American policy, co-opting Sunni militias into the *quwat al-ṣaḥwa* (awakening forces), Christians in Simon's neighbourhood were afforded some measure of protection against rival militias and gangs. Paradoxically, for Simon, his son's affiliation to the local *quwat al-ṣaḥwa* resulted in a direct death threat which compelled the family to flee Iraq in 2010. As with all the respondents I spoke to, Mary and Simon were quick to emphasise fear of persecution for reasons of their religious identity – indicative of the persecution narrative that all my respondents were keen to employ. We have seen how the militias targeted minority groups in Iraq. In the following section I consider the reach of sectarian militias into public institutions and how this was to have repercussions for the Iraqi population writ large.

#### **4.5. Militia Influence over state institutions.**

A further consequence of the De-Ba'athification Law was that employment opportunities became increasingly dependent on sectarian affiliation. Before civil war broke out, sectarian groups were taking up positions in civil institutions which the American occupation had "cleansed" of Ba'athists. The education sector became a key site of struggle and contest between competing factions<sup>141</sup> (Fuller and Adriaenssens 2010). Farouk had been teaching at a university in

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<sup>141</sup> Interview with Iraqi student in Damascus, 6 August 2010.

Baghdad. Here he describes how sectarianism directly impacted on the life-chances of students and as the De-Ba'athification Law took hold new faces were drafted in resulting in the targeting of established staff members:

Farouk: We saw that the atmosphere had changed - the personnel at the college and the competencies required to work there changed. Until the time came that people didn't understand a thing of what was happening around them. They started expelling students based on their names. This name would show you belong to this sect and another name would show you belonged to another. There were people seduced by what was happening. At that time people were climbing aboard because of their emotions not because of [any inherent belief in] sectarianism. There were certain areas where having a particular name could land you in a lot of trouble. People started to toy with corruption with support from foreign forces. In this period we started seeing changes in the faces that were teaching at the college. There started to be more duplicity, there started to be more witch-hunts and threats. Everything (went) bad; they targeted the big scholars, the professors and the doctors, the ones who had developed the country. Is it possible to make trouble for a teacher that taught you? Is it possible?

Students at the Iraqi Student Project (ISP) in Damascus corroborated the dismal state in which Iraqi education found itself. Many of them had sought refuge in Syria recognizing that the odds of attaining success in Iraq were stacked against them, particularly if they were Sunni. In August 2009, student demonstrations broke out in Sunni dominated areas in Iraq including Ramadi, Hit and Aadhamiye demanding that the Ministry of Education be held responsible for a sectarian agenda which had seen the downgrading of Sunni students' exam results.<sup>142</sup>

#### **4.6. *Wāsta* and having the right connections**

For teachers without the requisite levels of social capital, unemployment beckoned. Abu Yaseen had been teaching in Yemen when the Americans invaded. He returned to Iraq four months into the occupation and set about looking for work in secondary education. As was the case with Farouk, it became imperative that faces and names fitted with the new political alignments that exercised control over the education sector. He told me:

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<sup>142</sup> See Saleem, R. (2009) "Al-Ta'alīm fi Mustanqā'a al-Ta'ifiya fil 'Iraq (Education in the Quagmire of Sectarianism in Iraq)", *Al-Hewar*[online] 5 August 2009, Available at: <http://ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=180286> [Accessed on 12 March 2012]

Abu Yaseen: I came back from Yemen and applied for work and they [the Ministry of Education] rejected me. They said you have to bring a document showing that you weren't a Ba'thist, that you belonged to one of the opposition groups. So, of course, I went to Hizb al-Withāq, I had a friend there, who wrote out a document saying that I was with Hizb al-Withāq and Ayyad Allawi. When I went to the Ministry of Education, they asked me if I was a former Ba'thist. I said 'no, why do you ask?' They said 'everyone at Hizb al-Withāq used to be with the Ba'th.' I said 'I'm not Ba'thist or anything.' They said okay and registered me, but nothing came of it. Some time passed and I went and got clearance from the office of Muqtada al-Sadr through a friend of mine - that was *wāsta* (brokerage connections) of course, and I was able to get back to work. Of course, it wasn't easy, sorting all this out. So you can see that everyone started belonging to one group or another, and each of these groups, be it Sadr, SCIRI and Badr, Hizb al-Islami, Ayyad Allawi or Hizb al-Fadhīla all felt they had a right to Iraq. An educated person could see straight away that there would be a sectarian conflict.

For an individual navigating the emerging political realities of post-Saddam Iraq, the bewildering array of political actors influencing what remained of state institutions was a difficult task. Despite Abu Yaseen not belonging to any of the fledgling political factions he made recourse to *wāsta* (brokerage connections). *Wāsta* plays a salient role in Syria and it could be said for the wider Middle East. This is significant as it alerts us to the idea of the relational self. As I make clear throughout this thesis, religion is best conceptualised relationally. Iraqi forced migrants position themselves in relation to other faith based actors and humanitarian organisations. Here, Abu Yaseen approached – through intermediaries - both representatives of the Sadr movement and the Sunni Hizb al-Withāq in order to secure employment with the Ministry of Education. The construct of the relational self is a theme that I will return to in Chapters Five and Six.

Often *wāsta* presents itself in the guise of fictive kin relationships. Suad Joseph (1996:200) observes that through the use of the family idiom in wider social relations, people in the Middle East “call up the expectations and morality of kinship”. Often, my respondents would refer to me as *akhi* (brother) and I would reciprocate by referring to elder respondents as *'ammi* (my paternal uncle) or *khāla* (maternal aunt). Doing so, as a researcher, was in recognition of the trust they were imparting to me in narrating their stories. I was also ascribing to the social norm of deference to elders. As such there was an implicit understanding

that as a fictive family member, I would not do anything that would be of harm to them. Implicit in the use of family idiom was that we were equally in need of one another. The respondents knew that I required their assistance to complete my research while I was cognizant of the fact that a British researcher was a valuable resource who could be called upon for help and advice.

#### 4.7. Contesting religious meaning on campus

University campuses also became a site for struggle in the religious field. Ibtisam had been a student at Mustansiriya, a prestigious university in Baghdad. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2007, a bomb attack on the university left 70 academics and students dead with 169 people injured.<sup>143</sup> A strike was called by student affiliates to the Jaysh al-Mahdi who had a growing presence on campus. The strike lasted two weeks indicating the hold sectarian groups had over educational institutions. Ibtisam told me:

Ibtisam: It was around this time that the Shi'a especially started talking freely because the government was made up of the Shi'a and they would say things like "you deserved what happened in Fallujah" and I would ask "why?" They would answer "because you Sunna didn't defend us during the Nineties when Saddam was slaughtering us in front of your eyes." I would ask them how the two were connected. What point are you trying to make? This is the American army and they are *muḥtallīn* (occupiers). For sure, there were lots of mistakes committed by Saddam, but there's no need to show hostility to an *ibn al-balad* (native son). I was astonished when I heard these things. I mean, I'd hear this from my own group of friends. We were a group of six friends and one of them would talk like this.

When it would be the occasion for the memorial of Karbala, there would be people dressed in black and they would be doing the *laṭm* (ritual lamentation) and it would make me laugh because this was a college- a place of learning and study *mu le haich marāsīm* (not for these ceremonies) *makan muhassas le dirāse mu hay shaghlāt* (it's a place specifically for learning, not these kind of actions). One day they were doing the *laṭm* (ritual lamentation) and they freaked out and started attacking people from the education department and they beat some women – just like that. Why? We don't know.

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<sup>143</sup> For further details see Cave, D. (2007), "3 Bombs Kill at Least 70 at University in Baghdad", *The New York Times*, [online] 17 January 2007. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/17/world/middleeast/17baghdad.html> [Accessed on 21 March 2012].



As was the case with the testimonies of Abu Yaseen, George and Farouk, Ibtisam also registers surprise and bewilderment at the level of hostility shown to the Sunna and minority groups. Her reference to the antagonism towards an *ibn al-balad* (native son) reveals much of what lies at the heart of the sectarian conflict in Iraq; ownership of the cultural symbols of the state. It refers to the emerging architecture of the new state wherein undesired populations are targeted for removal. Who qualifies as an *ibn al-balad*? Time and again male respondents would hold up the palm of their hand with fingers outstretched as a motif for how they understood belonging in Iraq. The hand represented Iraq with each of the fingers representing the different communities of Iraq. The removal of a finger was a disfigurement of the hand, they argued, whereby it lost its strength and capability. Yet, there has been continuity in the Iraqi state's approach to the various fingers of the Iraqi hand. As we saw in the previous chapter, the state under Saddam had coerced hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shi'i to leave Iraq under the pretext that they had Iranian ancestry and therefore were not considered as *ibn al-balad*.

By October 2009 the government had decided to temporarily close Mustansiriya University after a professor had been pistol whipped by a student group affiliated to the ruling Hizb al-Da'wa.<sup>144</sup> The presence of the militias was felt in other cities also. Hanan had been studying in Basra at the time. She told me that there were Sadrists who would patrol the university campus despite not being students there; describing them as "people who act religious but don't even know how to read or write [...] they were young and had a certain way of speaking. They just didn't look like university students." Here, Hanan posits a positive correlation between religiosity and education. For her, the Sadrist patrols at the campus were conducted by uneducated people who were distinctly unlike her: "they had a certain way of speaking" which meant their religiosity was far from being authentic but was a performance.

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<sup>144</sup> Williams, T and Mohammed, R. (2009), "Iraqi Campus is Under Gang's Sway", *New York Times* [online] October 19 2009, Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/world/middleeast/20university.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/world/middleeast/20university.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all) [Accessed on 21 March 2012].

Much of the time, the Sadrists would concentrate on enforcing moral codes. At the entrance to Hanan's college Sadrist guards not employed or affiliated to the college would take it upon themselves to conduct body searches on students entering the college

Hanan: If you were a girl, a girl would search you – a woman, actually. She'd be wearing a hijab and a *juba*.<sup>145</sup> The hijab was very extreme – you couldn't even see her chin. So one day there wasn't a female guard there, but one of the Sadrists (a male guard) and they searched my bag. I told my boyfriend and he was very angry- he ended up having a problem with them. Another time, again there was no female guard, and he said you're not wearing the uniform. The uniform was black white and grey, and I wasn't wearing those colours. He said 'give me your college ID card'. I said 'No, I'm not going to give it to you'. He then asked for my bag and again I refused. Then he said 'Okay, I'll find out what your name is and then we'll see'. I said 'Go to hell, do what you want to do'. After a week or maybe less, there was a list put up on a notice board with some names on it. It contained a *tanbih* (caution) for students. It happened that all the girls who were on the list were ones who didn't wear the hijab- myself included.

The convergence on university campuses and control over the educational sector in general by sectarian affiliated groups is indicative of how sectarian politics nurtured from above by the American occupation permeated into the everyday lives of Iraqi citizens. It also presaged the targeting of mixed neighbourhoods by militias. The following section considers the impact of greater religious symbolism at the neighbourhood level.

#### **4.8. Greater visibility of religious symbolism**

As whole neighbourhoods came under the sway of militias such as JAM, the Badr brigades, Hizb al-Islami, or even al-Qaeda, more and more people were displaced changing the character and demographics of whole neighbourhoods. Areas made up of mixed populations particularly close to strongholds of militia backed groups were particularly susceptible. Hamid told me that the character of his neighbourhood changed making it barely recognizable:

Hamid: Religious parties were becoming more prominent on the street and holding people to account. Bars and restaurants were closed. Women had to start wearing the hijab if they came out on the streets and

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<sup>145</sup> A long flowing outer garment worn by women, usually in black. It is often regarded as a sign of conservatism; more so than the hijab.

not just the hijab but the *juba* also. Then you started seeing a lot more of Shi'i activities like *laṭm* (ritual lamentation). Barber shops would be separated from the hairdressers for women. Women weren't allowed to drive cars on the street. They closed down the shops that sold alcohol. They were following the example of the Salafists [...] they had changed the *mulamiḥ* (traits) of the neighbourhood and it became an area that was under their mercy. To the point that even the police were controlled by the JAM. Even if you had a problem- a dispute with somebody, you would have to go to their offices or headquarters to resolve the issue. So, the area became locked down by them. During that time, of course, the area had originally been a mixed area with Sunna, Shi'a, and Kurd. I mean, it was really *makhlūta* (mixed). Due to its proximity to Madinat al-Sadr, they were able to have control over it.

The targeting of mixed neighbourhoods by sectarian militias was a key trigger for the displacement of many Iraqis. This “un-mixing of neighbourhoods” induces mass displacements caused by - in no short measure - a loss of “community integrity” (Marfleet 2007:407) as pressures are brought to bear with the targeted killings of key community figures such as health workers, teachers and religious figures. The loss of familiar and trusted figures, it is argued, cumulatively builds pressure on those left behind to make the critical decision of when to leave (Moore and Shellman 2004). In addition, it should be noted that for my respondents, the difficulty did not lie exclusively with Shi'i neighbours but with Iraqis unfamiliar to them who entered the neighbourhood as outsiders. This once again points to a key aspect of my argument; namely, relational aspects of home-making lie at the heart of emplacement strategies for Iraqi forced migrants. With the breakdown of relational notions of home, displacement often ensues. I explore this further in Chapter Six. As Hamid notes, it is the prominence of religious symbolism on the street which contributed to changing the characteristics of neighbourhoods. Let us see what this demonstration of religious symbolism meant.

The fall of Baghdad on April 9 2003 witnessed the return of Shi'i symbolism in Iraqi public space. Shi'i crowds thronged poorer districts of Baghdad beating their chests and carrying cultural artefacts relating to Shi'i rituals. Faleh Abdul Jabbar (2003a:15) noted that the “power of ritual had been unleashed” adding that:

[C]hest beating is a coded display of allegiance to Imam Hussein, as well as a display of protest and a physical statement to convey past grievances. In this ritual, pain is a medium of catharsis. It purifies the physical body and releases trapped agonies; it also holds a promise of happiness to come (ibid.).

The past grievances included the abandonment of the Intifada Sha'abaniyah by non-Shi'i Iraqis as well as the numerous socio-economic inequalities that many of the poor Iraqi Shi'i had to contend with under Saddam's regime. On my many visits to the shrine at Sayyida Zayneb, I would see men formed in circles of all ages and nationalities beating their chests while one from their number would lead the *laṭm*. On different occasions I witnessed altogether less frenetic displays akin to a choral recitation and on others a more physical and energetic display recalling the chanting one might hear on a street protest or a football terrace, drawing perspiration and perhaps even drops of blood from the zealous striking of the chest. Within the confines of the shrine complex, it seemed to me a very moving and spiritual spectacle, one wherein adherents make claim to their right to justice in the face of oppression – this being the driving narrative espoused by the Shi'a behind the martyrdom of Imam Hussein.

However, once taken into public space the very same rituals become merged with already prejudicial and unfavourable attitudes towards the Shi'i urban poor of Baghdad. Hamid and Ibtisam attest to the unease felt by minority groups in Iraq at the renewed vigour and confidence of public displays of faith by the Shi'a. Hamid identifies these assertive proclamations of religious belonging with a concerted campaign targeting the visibility of other minority faiths. Thus the increasingly public displays of ceremonial mourning by Shi'i Iraqis have become associated in Hamid's memory with the closure of shops selling alcohol and the enforcing of dress and behaviour codes upon women. Ibtisam's memory of public performance of *laṭm* places it as an act that accompanied violence on women and others. Similarly, the assertiveness of the Sadrists in Hanan's college targeted their efforts at control over womens' bodies.

Another key indicator of the increased visibility of Shi'i hegemony was the proliferation of non-governmental offices affiliated to the militias. Once again, turning to the example of the JAM, we can see that the Sadrist movement sought to consolidate itself throughout Baghdad. This was achieved by establishing offices known as *Makatib al-Shahīd al-Thani* (Offices of the Second Martyr) outside its strongholds of Madinat al-Sadr and Sho'la and moving into areas with a mixed Sunni and Shi'i population such as Madinat Hurriye or Hayy al-Salām. A key function of the offices was to oversee the resettlement of Shi'i families displaced through sectarian strife and to act as an arbitrator for local disputes (International Crisis Group 2006b:20). Tariq at the Rābeta al-Falastīniyi al-'Iraq told me that the situation was more complex. In fact, families made arrangements with friends across the sectarian divide to agree to exchange homes as a strategy to attain security. With the establishment of offices came an increased presence of the JAM which conducted local paramilitary parades as a show of strength and as an intimidatory tactic designed to frighten and subdue the remaining Sunni families into abandoning their homes.<sup>146</sup> In addition, as confirmed by both Hamid and Abu Yaseen above, the JAM had significant leverage with government bodies including the police and the Ministry of Education.

#### **4.9. Trust deficits**

Haidar describes himself as “a simple Muslim” and “not a scholar of Islam” nor as “someone who practices *tasawwuf* (the Sufi way of life)” but nonetheless tries “to act on the verses of the Qur'an”. He had worked in a senior capacity for the Ministry of Health in Iraq for 25 years. Despite being Shi'i, his home came under attack by co-religionists from the Faylaq Badr (Badr Corps), the military arm of the Iranian backed SCIRI in April 2004. A threatening note left for him made clear that he was targeted for taking care of “wanted” persons. Leaving his hometown in the south of Iraq with his wife and four daughters he headed for Baghdad. As mentioned earlier, one of the key functions of the offices established by the Sadrists was to re-house co-religionists who had been internally displaced. However, given the circumstances under which Haidar and

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<sup>146</sup> Author's interview with Palestinian-Iraqi Refugee, Mukhayim al-Yarmouk, January 2011.

his family were initially forced to seek refuge in Baghdad, it is unsurprising that he would be reticent in choosing to approach Shi'i religious organisations for assistance. He told me:

Haidar: The only support I got was from relatives and friends. Support amongst friends is all there was. Let's say Tahir is a friend. He knows the kind of circumstances I am in, so he helps me, sending me clothes for my daughters, or sending me foodstuff. There was nothing through organisations or anything like that. It was just specific individuals from friends and family. Perhaps there were some organisations operating, I'm not going to deny that, but I never benefited from anything they offered – nor did they help me.

When I pressed Haidar on why he had neither received nor asked for assistance from religious organisations, he was keen to draw a distinction between what he understood as authentic Islam and the emergence of political actors who mobilised religion for more worldly ends:

Haidar: Islamic organisations would take care of their own (people). The Shi'a would take care of their own and be connected to Iran. The Sunni would look after their own (people). It wasn't like this before the occupation – in fact it was the opposite. Before the invasion there was no such distinction, we were one people; united. Even until now, Islam is employed in Iraq by both the Shi'a and the Sunna. There, the Shi'a are divided into something like twenty different groups – you have the Badr Corps, you have the ones affiliated to Sadr and others to Maliki and it has nothing really to do with Islam. The Sunna are also similarly split. This all goes against the teachings of Islam which tells us Islam is peace, Islam is for the good. Islam is the interpretation of the words of the Prophet, peace and prayers on him. After the Prophet had migrated from Makkah to Madina and Islam triumphed, he [the Prophet] said that everyone was welcome in the refuge of Islam. That's the real Islam. Islam is not killing and taking of innocent lives [...] Islam has excellent laws. Not just excellent but equitable and just. The problem is that the ones who are controlling the implementation of these laws label themselves as religious. They are the ones who are *mu'adin* (antagonistic). They make a lot of mistakes [...] Now you have, forgive me for saying these words, you have the business of Islam at the expense of orphans, at the expense of people who have been cut off from their wealth, So there's no comparison between then (the time of the Prophet and his companions) and now. Here, you can ask any Iraqi whether they have been offered anything by Islamic, I seek forgiveness in God, I'm not saying Islam but I mean the people who have control over Islamic institutions – have they offered any Iraqi anything? Ask any Iraqi, and they'll say no. They'll say no. Nobody has provided them with anything

Here, Haidar juxtaposes the fragmentation of Iraqi society following the American invasion with the inclusiveness of the time of the Prophet. “Everyone was welcome in the refuge of Islam,” Haidar reminds us. In contrast, barriers today have been erected between Iraqis on the basis of faith which “have nothing really to do with Islam”. As with Abu Yaseen earlier, Haidar is presenting himself as someone who is tolerant of others in opposition to the parties that have come to govern in Iraq today whom he labels as *mu’adin* (antagonistic). Unlike Palestinian-Iraqis however, his narrative of persecution begins much later with the onset of the American invasion.

Having identified himself as a believer, Haidar is careful not to disparage Islamic beliefs. He recognizes that I also identify as Muslim and having learned why I wished to conduct research on matters of religion makes clear that his views on religion do not necessarily tally with his views on religious actors and institutions. The two can be mutually exclusive. His assertion that “there is no comparison” between contemporary Muslims in positions of authority and the time of the Prophet and his companions is a marking of boundaries across time and space; boundaries which draw a line between him and religious institutions. The rise to power of religious figures in contemporary Iraq is regarded by Haidar as a commercial enterprise which has come at his expense. His own forced migration from Iraq puts him in the category of people who “have been cut off from their wealth” and his children have effectively become “orphaned” by his prolonged absence from them in Iraq. His choice, of using “orphans” and “people cut off from their wealth” as examples, is deliberate as they are both categories eligible for *zakāt*. Religious actors and institutions are often key conduits for the redistribution of income through *zakāt* and *sadaqa*. The *hawazat* (theological seminaries) and *makātib al-wukala’* (offices of the representatives of Ayatollahs) which dominate the alleys and crowded avenues around the shrine of Sayyida Zayneb where Haidar lives and works are criticized by some as mechanisms for upholding privileges of the *‘ulamā*.<sup>147</sup>

The failure of clerics in Iraq to halt or even stem the upsurge in sectarian violence left many Iraqis who had sought refuge outside of Iraq disillusioned

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Author’s conversation with a resident of Sayyida Zayneb, Damascus, 28 August 2010

with the role of clerics and religious institutions. I had asked Adnan why he had left Iraq. The conversation began with a perfunctory description of the lawlessness engendered through the rise of the militias and very quickly developed into a rebuke and critique of religious authorities in Iraq. He was particularly scathing of Ayatollah al-Sistani who is regarded by many as the leading Shi'i religious authority in Iraq. Describing the quietist approach of al-Sistani which places religion outside of politics, Adnan related a proverb which he attributed to Islamic teaching: "*al-saket 'an al ḥaqq, shaitan akhras* (the one who keeps silent from saying the truth is a mute devil)". For Adnan, the rising power of militias in Iraq was directly attributable to religious authorities. He told me:

Adnan: These people are *zu'ran* (thugs) - I mean the clerics who work to control religion. There are some clerics in history like *al-khulafā'a al rāshidīn*<sup>148</sup> who did a lot for religion, while most of the clerics nowadays like al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr and some others work as *murtazaqa* (mercenaries) for religion. What have they ever done for Islam? What have they ever done for Islamic society? What problems have they ever fixed in society? What is their role? Yesterday we were talking, if you go to the church you find help, the church provides for you but the mosque takes from you. This might be politically intentional – this is possible. The criterion has changed. Who is al-Sistani or Muqtada al-Sadr [for me] to go and ask them what I should and should not do? In the end God will take his soul back and erase him from existence. So, I'm not a supporter of these kinds of clerics and I don't have any faith in them or recognize their authority. I don't pray regularly but when I think about Islam, there is our Prophet's example, our Qur'an and there is God. What business do I have with these people? How can I obey a stranger that doesn't play any role in Islam and in Islamic life?

As with Haidar, Adnan is careful not to equate the actions of contemporary religious figures with idealized figures from Islamic history. Adnan's referencing of *al-khulafā'a al rāshidīn* imparts a refusal to adopt the sectarian narrative. The caliphs, who preceded Imam Ali, are often the targets of much invective by sectarian-minded Shi'is. In contrast, Adnan recognizes them as among those "who did a lot to work for religion". His attack is not on religious belief and traditions but rather on what he calls "thugs" and "mercenaries" who "work to

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<sup>148</sup> Literally: The rightly guided Caliphs. This epithet is given by the Sunna to the first four Caliphs who were chosen to lead after the death of Prophet Muhammad. They are Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, 'Umar bin al-Khattab, 'Uthman bin 'Affān and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.



control religion". "These kinds of clerics" are the ones he finds irksome and not representative of his beliefs. As Adnan puts it "the criterion" for what constitutes a meaningful role for religious actors and institutions has changed. It is no longer enough that they stay quiet and acquiesce to the demands of political authority but they put themselves at the services of the people, first and foremost.

## **Conclusion**

The roots of the current sectarian conflict stretch far back into the history of the modern Iraqi state. I have shown in this chapter that the Iraqi state under Saddam had adopted a sectarian discourse during the war with Iran. However, it was only openly acknowledged as such following the Intifada Sha'abaniyah. The repercussions of the quashing of the uprising were brought to bear on the lives of minority groups in Baghdad following the American invasion and occupation.

This chapter has explored how the removal of Ba'thist state structures by the American occupying forces allowed for the contest over the cultural ownership of the state. This was primarily played out through assertive mobilisation of religious symbolism by emerging political parties which employed a religious idiom to articulate their grievances. Shi'i cultural and religious practices became ever more visible in public spaces whereas previously the faith campaign had privileged Sunni symbolism and religious practice. Equally important was the alignment of emergent forces such as the Jaysh al-Mahdi and the Badr Corps with the new apparatus of state. The testimonies of Abu Fu'ad, Hamid, Farouk and Abu Yaseen all point to the influence of militias over security forces and government ministries.

On a methodological note, in the narratives of my participants I noted how they moved back and forth in space and time. This slippage between the "here" in Syria and the "then" in Iraq is indicative of the importance of the genesis and structuring of the religious habitus. To understand how and why a religious disposition is acted upon, we must look into the past to see how it was structured. In the case of my Palestinian-Iraqi respondents we saw how current

events in Syria and the looming threat of sectarian conflict showed the past to be unfinished.

Testimony from my respondents in Damascus indicates that many had internalised Ba'thist discourses of the *intifada* *Sha'abaniyah* in which the underclass of recent Shi'i migrants from the south of Iraq, residing in the slums of Madinat al-Sadr were cast in the role of folk-devils. Mu'tasim describes Madinat al-Sadr as being a no-go zone populated by people with the "faces of criminals" prior to the invasion despite the state having a security presence. Both George and Adnan liken the Shi'i urban poor as being without culture, knowledge, ethics and religion. As we saw in Chapter Three, religion is once again understood as being ethical.

Respondents also indicated surprise at the rapid descent into sectarian conflict. George likened it to a volcanic eruption, while Ibtisam expressed bewilderment at Shi'i classmates who viewed the American onslaught on Fallujah as recompense for the failure of Sunni colleagues to speak out against what had happened during the *Intifada* *Sha'abaniyah*. Both narratives highlight a grievance that had been festering for over a decade and had remained unaddressed.

As sectarianism in Iraq shifted from an assertive to a more aggressive mode, many of those displaced by sectarian conflict expressed disillusionment and anger towards religious figures and institutions, disassociating Islam from the actions and words of leading religious figures. Haidar makes clear there is a distinction between the teachings of Islam and the actions of militias affiliated to religious groups who traffic in the commerce of religion. Adnan suggests the dissonance between the words and the actions of key religious figures means that all claims to legitimacy have been lost or as he puts it "*al-mawazīn* (the criterion) has changed". In short, a trust-deficit appears. The lack of trust in religious actors and state institutions opens up possibilities for religious traditions to be thought anew by ordinary Muslims. Yet questions remain. Does such disillusionment signal a loss of faith? If so – faith in what? God? Religious institutions? How are such experiences, which played a pivotal role in triggering

displacement, reflected and inscribed in the practices of Iraqi forced migrants in Damascus? These questions will be explored in the remaining chapters.

## Chapter Five

### Jockeying for Positions in the Humanitarian Field

*Narrated Abdullah bin 'Umar: Allah's Apostle said: "A Muslim is a brother of another Muslim, so he should not oppress him, nor should he hand him over to an oppressor. Whoever fulfilled the needs of his brother, Allah will fulfil his needs; whoever brought his (Muslim) brother out of a discomfort, Allah will bring him out of the discomforts of the Day of Resurrection, and whoever screened (concealed the faults of) a Muslim, Allah will screen him on the Day of Resurrection."*<sup>149</sup>

#### Introduction

A rise in the number of interventions by faith-based organisations (FBOs) in the humanitarian field worldwide has re-ignited debate as to what the role of religion in the public sphere ought to be. This chapter presents a nuanced examination of the role of religious networks and institutions in relation to strategies of forced migrants in urban contexts. It also considers how such organisations, in relation to the state and the UNHCR, work to integrate displaced populations into their new surroundings.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with Iraqi refugees and refugee service providers in Damascus, I consider how Iraqi refugees, as active social agents, utilise religious networks and institutions in conjunction with established international humanitarian organisations to produce a distinctive geography of exile. I also draw attention to how the Syrian state exerts influence over religious actors and how this ultimately affects the decision making of forced migrants. I contend that partnerships formed between the state, UNHCR and international NGOs result in a protection impasse for Iraqi refugees in Damascus.

#### 5.1. Refugee agency

As the Global South undergoes intense urbanization it is perhaps unsurprising that a growing number of forcibly displaced people can be found in urban

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<sup>149</sup> Sahīh Bukhāri Vol.3, Book 43, Number 622.

environments. It has been estimated that as many as half of the world's refugee population now reside in towns and cities across the world (UNHCR 2009a:2). It is equally unsurprising that forced migrants originally from urban areas would seek refuge in the familiar landscape of a city rather than rural camps where the rhythm of life and the opportunities available would seem wholly alien. This shift away from refugee camps and towards cities has taken place in spite of the UNHCR and state policies. Moreover, it is indicative of the agency of refugees.

The notion of agency puts individuals at the heart of social inquiry wherein they are understood to be social actors who are continually interpreting, re-interpreting and internalising their experiences while simultaneously acting upon those experiences. It embraces the "capability to command relevant skills, access to material and non-material resources and engage in particular organising practices" (Long 2001:49). Conceptualising refugees as social actors stands in marked contrast to more popular imaginings of refugees. Forcibly displaced people are often typecast as passive victims of circumstance.

Liisa Malkki (1996:384) suggests that for humanitarian actors working with Hutu refugees in Tanzania, the conferring of refugee status was often contingent on a "performative dimension" which would help humanitarian actors identify bona fide refugees. Similarly, it is not uncommon for refugees displaced in the Global South to be found in the archive of television news footage, magazines and newspapers cutting a forlorn, beleaguered figure, caged in a circuit of dependency, desperately in need of humanitarian aid and assistance.

What is often ignored in such readings is the idea that although refugees have been forcibly displaced, there is a measure of volition in how they adapt to changing circumstances; lived experiences of refugees and other forcibly displaced people have historically been neglected in the analysis of refugee flows. Only more recently have refugee narratives emerged; highlighting the complexity surrounding debates on identity and what it means to be a refugee (Al-Sharmani 2004; Nassari 2007, McMichael 2007). Recent studies have also shown that despite socio-economic and political marginalisation, self-settled

refugees actively participate in the transformation of urban spaces (Grabska 2006, Campbell 2006).

In response to both increasing levels of self-settlement in urban areas by refugees and recognition of the inadequate assistance afforded to them, the UNHCR (2009a:3-4) issued a revised policy statement that considered “urban areas to be legitimate place(s) for refugees to enjoy their rights.” This can equally be seen as an admission of an inherent bias towards a “one size fits all” camp solution in its past dealings with refugee populations.

While adhering to a rights-based approach, the new UNHCR policy towards urban refugees was to be predicated on advancing the somewhat ambiguous and non-legal concept of “protection space”.<sup>150</sup> This is defined as being “the extent to which a conducive environment exists for the internationally recognized rights of refugees to be respected and their needs to be met” with the caveat that “protection space is not static, but expands and contracts periodically according to changes<sup>151</sup> in the political, economic, social and security environments” (UNHCR 2009a:4). A key component of securing protection space for urban refugees is the partnership that the UNHCR is able to foster with state institutions and local community based organisations. It is in this context that refugee service provision and assistance can best be understood in the case of Iraqi refugees in Damascus. In what follows, I consider how FBOs,<sup>152</sup> the state and the UNHCR interact with refugees and address the latter’s welfare and their survival strategies. Before doing so, it is necessary to consider the specific circumstances of the displacement of Iraqis to Damascus.

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<sup>150</sup> The availability of protection space is measured by a number of indicators. These include the extent to which refugees: are intimidated by local authorities; have access to health and education provision, have access to the labour market, enjoy freedom of movement, are able to secure residency status, and enjoy adequate living conditions (UNHCR 2009a:5).

<sup>151</sup> At the time of writing, Syria is experiencing tumultuous events which could potentially obliterate any advances made in establishing protection spaces for vulnerable populations, illustrating the precarious situation urban refugees are faced with.

<sup>152</sup> Here I take a faith-based organisation to be “any organization that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within that faith” (Clarke & Jennings 2008:6).

## 5.2. Iraqi refugees in Syria

According to Syrian government sources, 79% of the Iraqi population in Syria resides in Damascus and its environs (Di Iorio and Zeuthen 2011). This can be largely attributed to three key factors:

- the significance of Sayyida Zayneb;
- the location of institutions central to the strategies of refugees themselves; and
- the cumulative dimensions of refugee flows.

The South Damascus suburb of Sayyida Zayneb is the first port of call for taxis and buses arriving from Iraq. This route was well traversed by Iraqi pilgrims before the current exodus of refugees, connecting the major cities of Iraq including the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala with Damascus. Sayyida Zayneb is unlike any other suburb of Damascus. The golden dome of the shrine at the centre of the district dominates the skyline. Shopping avenues and street markets radiate from the shrine in all directions. *Makatib al-wukala* or the offices of representatives for all the leading Shi'i clerics from Iraq are based in close vicinity to the shrine. Here, the *khums* tax is collected from devotees and is used to fund the maintenance of the *hawazat* (religious seminaries), stipends for clerics and in some cases welfare. Banners with huge poster portraits of clerics hang across streets. Health clinics associated with the offices of representatives can be found nearby. These offer discounted rudimentary health services. Many of the shops carry names in reference to members of the *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's household) and cities from across Iraq. Iraqi bakeries, groceries and restaurants serving Iraqi cuisine are abundant. Street vendors can be found selling Iraqi flags, portraits of Imam Hussayn, and small cups of strongly brewed and sweet Iraqi tea. The particularly Iraqi feel to this district is epitomised by the informal naming of a main thoroughfare as "Iraqi street". For refugees arriving from Iraq Sayyida Zayneb seems instantly recognizable.

The Iraqi refugee population is distributed across Damascus along the lines of class and religious affiliation. This is not to say that these groups are guided by sectarian inclination but rather that such an outcome is congruent with the salience of the role of social networks in migratory processes; Iraqi refugees in

Damascus settle where relatives can help navigate their arrival in a new city (Leenders, 2008). As such, large number of Iraqi Christians and Mandaean<sup>153</sup> reside in Jaramana. More prosperous Iraqi Sunnis predominate in the northern suburbs of Masaken Barzeh and Qudsiya. Palestinian Iraqis prefer to settle with other Palestinians in Mukhayim al-Yarmouk. Sayyida Zayneb and its environs, although having a particular Shi'i ambience, are home to many poorer Sunni families that are unable to afford housing elsewhere.

Figure 1 A popular Iraqi restaurant in Sayyida Zayneb



**Note:** A portrait of Imam Husayn hangs in the foreground. Further back is a portrait photograph of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and his father Hafez al-Asad.

**Source:** author.

<sup>153</sup>

Mandaism is a gnostic faith originating out of the Middle East. It shares much with other Abrahamic faiths including belief in the Prophets and an afterlife. The chief Prophet for the Mandaean is John the Baptist and baptism is a key ritual. They are also commonly referred to as Sabeans and are mentioned as such in the Qur'an. For further information refer to Buckley (2002).



Access to the Iraqi embassy, foreign embassies and the UNHCR means that many Iraqi forced migrants prefer Damascus to other urban centres. Most importantly, there is a cumulative dimension to refugee flows. It is worth noting here that Iraqi refugees were continuing to arrive in Damascus as late as March 2011.<sup>154</sup> The situation in Iraq is far from stable and sectarian attacks on minority groups (Abo al-Hab & Synovitz 2010) and indiscriminate roadside bombings continue unabated.<sup>155</sup> Prior to arriving in Damascus, many Iraqis already have a connection – usually a relative residing in the city. This brings into play a multiplier effect or what the migration theorist Douglas Massey (1990) has termed “cumulative causation”, as earlier acts of migration impact on the social contexts in which later migratory decisions are made, prompting higher levels of migration. As information flows across networks the possibility of migration is reassessed by those who have remained behind. The ability of those who migrated to find security, shelter and work is relayed back to the country of origin, reducing the risks and costs associated with migration.

Recognition of the fact that this is a refugee crisis that stretches back over the past two decades (Chatelard 2002) helps one to understand how and why Iraqi refugees in Syria are able to mobilise the few resources they have to begin the process of rebuilding their lives. In short, institutions and networks already exist that Iraqi refugees can interact with on arrival. But these opportunities are not open to all. With regard to Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Chatelard (2008) found that this interaction is predicated on issues of social class and the historical and political contexts surrounding their arrival. She notes that more recent refugee arrivals in Jordan “did not generally seek the patronage of the old elite who were simply not part of their social landscape” (Chatelard 2008). Similarly, many of the Iraqis who had escaped the Ba’thist regime of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein were affluent and middle class and had little in common with later arrivals who settled in poorer suburbs of Damascus. Prior to the 2003

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<sup>154</sup> The author had met with many newly arrived Iraqi refugees particularly from minority groups such as Christians and Palestinians during the course of his fieldwork in Damascus in 2010-11.

<sup>155</sup> With the anticipated American withdrawal from Iraq, there has been a spike in the frequency of such attacks. See BBC (2011) *Iraq Bomb Blasts: Toll in Baghdad rises to 36*. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15486320> [Accessed: 19 November 2011].

invasion of Iraq, it was estimated that 70% of the Iraqi population in Syria was Shi'i (UNHCR 2003). The majority of Iraqi refugees in Syria today nominally belong to minority sects or are Sunni (UNHCR 2008).

This study contends that religious institutions, networks, and traditions have been much overlooked in the literature on the cultural and social realities of recent Iraqi refugee arrivals in Syria. Although not apparent at a cursory glance, a careful examination of the humanitarian field reveals that Iraqi refugees' attitudes towards and relationships with religious networks and traditions have been reconfigured and reinterpreted in Damascus, helping to facilitate their survival strategies.

### **5.3. Religion & faith-based humanitarianism**

While much has been written on kin networks and the role they play in the migratory process (Boyd, 1989; Massey et al. 1993, Faist 1997, Evans 2007), scant attention has been paid by those interested in the sociology of forced migration to the role of religious networks. In discussion of refugee populations, the issue of religion has often been situated within the site of conflict and the attendant mobilization of religious identity for sectarian purposes (Sells 1996, Haddad 2011). More recently, qualitative studies have tended to focus on spirituality and the well being of refugees from a psycho-social perspective (Fry 2000, Gozdziaik 2002, Shoeb et al. 2007) or on the extent to which religion can help shape identity formation (Colic-Peisker 2005, McMichael 2002) rather than on the interaction of refugees with religious networks and institutions. Doraï (2011) writing on the role of migratory networks for Iraqi refugees plays down the salience of religious networks. However, this is predicated on a narrow understanding of religious networks as being *traditional* religious networks. In addition, the yardstick by which the importance of religious networks is measured is the value placed on the capacity of religious networks to facilitate onward migration. This study suggests that to assess the importance of religious networks, one must be clearer about defining religious practices and the contexts in which they are enacted.

Ferris (2011:609) observes that there has long been disquiet and perhaps even outright suspicion of the role of faith-based humanitarianism in Western societies where a strict separation of church and state is maintained. Ager & Ager (2011) posit that this in fact represents reluctance on the part of states and NGOs based in industrialized countries to engage with the post-secularism that has accompanied increased globalization. They tell us that while “secularism is in principle ‘neutral’ to religion, in practice the secular framing of the humanitarian regime marginalizes religious practice and experience in the conceptualization of humanitarian action at both global and local levels” (Ager and Ager 2011:457). This is brought about through thinking of religious practice and experience in limited material terms. For instance, a common trend in understanding the role of religion in the public sphere is the buzz that surrounds religious institutions as sites where social capital can be built and community relations fostered (Furbey et al. 2006, Furbey 2007, Rochester et al. 2007). A corollary is that secular humanitarian responses fail to address potentialities that lie within an engagement with the faiths of displaced groups. Simply put a prayer meeting or the communal breaking of a fast is more than just an expression of social capital or community cohesion.

Here, I re-assert the importance of insights developed by Tweed (2006), who defines religion as “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (Tweed 2006:54). This notion of home-making and the crossing of boundaries is imminently useful in interpreting religious practice and belief. It lends itself readily to the study of displaced people, as they are the embodiment of boundary crossing. Here boundaries are geographic, cultural, linguistic and symbolic and refugees are compelled to make homes anew, finding both joy and suffering in the process. Moreover, Tweeds’ approach captures the notion of agency: home-making is an activity and requires somebody to do it. Thus it does not necessarily privilege religious institutions as the producers of religious goods.

In Chapter One, I noted a shortcoming in Tweed’s definition: namely, the omission of institutions and structures which influence the practice and

decision-making of refugees. Here, I have in mind primarily the state, UNHCR and other religious institutions. To help my engagement with Tweed I suggest a Bourdieuan understanding of the humanitarian “field”. In light of my earlier discussion on the materialist bent of the discourse on humanitarianism, Bourdieu (1986) - who understands the pursuit of the manifold forms of capital to be the defining characteristic of the human condition - may at first seem an unusual choice of theorist to help expound on the interaction between refugees and faith based organisations.

For Bourdieu, the actions of people, *practice*, unfold in a multitude of interconnected and occasionally coinciding *fields* that in aggregate comprise the multidimensional space that we call society. Thus, a field is where the struggle over the various forms of capital is located. It is within this field that agents (often the consumers of capital) and institutions including the state (often the producers of capital) take their positions. Bourdieu maintains that we ought to regard a field as “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97). As such, we are all invested in the capital *game*; whether we are producing capital, consuming it or striving to accumulate it. In the context of faith-based humanitarianism in Syria, the ways and extent to which religious ideas and practices are mobilised are shaped by competing and often conflicting interests of the state, religious institutions, humanitarian organisations and the refugees themselves. It is precisely this relational aspect which is of special importance in the present context: the relationship between the structure of the situation in which social agents act and their disposition which influences social actors to take certain positions against or with others in the field (Bourdieu 1998).

#### **5.4. State, religion & Iraqi refugees**

When is an FBO not an FBO? The punchline: when it operates in Syria. Early in my fieldwork, a sobering experience with a local charity alerted to me to the complexity of the struggles in the humanitarian field. Having received an introduction through an employee at *Jam'īyat al-Ansār*,<sup>156</sup> a charity based at

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<sup>156</sup> The name al-Ansār is in reference to the people of Madina who welcomed Prophet Muhammad and the exiles from Makkah into their community.

*Mujamma'a Kaftāro*,<sup>157</sup> an imposing mosque academy complex in Rukn Eddin in North Damascus, I went to visit the Director of the organisation. I introduced myself and outlined the research I hoped to do. Despite the organisation having a name that alludes to ideas of migration and hospitality and the fact that it was located on the premises of a mosque complex, the director categorically rejected the idea that it was a faith-based initiative. Moreover, he was emphatic in his insistence that it had any dealings with Iraqi refugees:

Director: So why have you come here?  
 Tahir: Well, you're based here at *Mujamma'a Kaftāro*.  
 Director: And...? What does that have to do with anything?  
 Tahir: Would you not say that you're a faith based organisation?  
 Director: No.  
 Tahir: [looking a little bemused] what about the verses of the Qur'an that are on the walls of your office [pointing]?  
 Director: Nothing to say that we're a faith-based organisation.  
 Tahir: But the name of your organisation seems to suggest that there is a faith dimension to your organisation. I thought you might work with displaced people.  
 Director: I can assure you we do not work with any Iraqis; none at all. If you want to meet with organisations that help Iraqi refugees, you're better off visiting Bab Touma. Even if they came here, we wouldn't be able to help them.  
 Tahir: Why not?  
 Director: You'll have to ask the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour<sup>158</sup> about that.<sup>159</sup>

This brief exchange reveals much concerning the complexities surrounding welfare provision for Iraqi refugees in Damascus. The reticence of the Director in describing the works of his organisation as faith-based stems from Syrian Law on the formation of NGOs. Under Law No.93 (1958) amended in 1970,<sup>160</sup> governance and regulation of private institutions and charities is overseen by MoSAL. This is widely recognized as one of the most influential ministries operating in Syria.<sup>161</sup> The reach of the state into the activities of charities and local NGOs should not be under-estimated; article 26 of the NGO Law demands

<sup>157</sup> The late Shaykh Ahmad Kaftāro, a proponent of the Naqshbandi Sufi Tariqa was appointed Grand Mufti of Syria in 1964. He retained close links with the ruling Ba'th party in Syria and was a favoured cleric of Hafez al-Assad. The main foyer of the Kaftāro complex is adorned with photographic portraits of Shaykh Ahmad Kaftāro immersed in deep conversation with Hafez al-Assad and in another portrait with Bashar al-Assad

<sup>158</sup> Henceforth referred to as MoSAL

<sup>159</sup> Author's interview with the Director of Jam'iyyat al-Ansār in Damascus, 6 May 2010.

<sup>160</sup> Henceforth referred to as the NGO Law

<sup>161</sup> Author's interview with Human Rights Lawyer in Damascus, 27 December 2010

that a government representative from MoSaL be placed on the board of directors. In addition, under Article 36, MoSAL may dissolve an organisation if:

- It conducts *ultra-vires* activities; meaning activities that are not permitted by its founding charter.
- It practices sectarian, racial, or political activity that threatens the well-being of the state.

The statute does not at any point define what is deemed sectarian, racial or political activity and the ambiguity of the term *salāmat al-dawla* (well-being of the state) leaves the state ample room to manoeuvre and interfere in the activities of local NGOs.

Moreover, mosques are also held answerable to the state through the Ministry of Awqāf (religious endowments). In the 1990s the state sought to assert some measure of control over the financial independence of mosques by separating the charitable activities from matters pertaining to worship. It was argued that this would curtail any improper use of funds collected by religious institutions.<sup>162</sup> By 2008, the state once again re-asserted itself by removing leading clerics from the board of directors of charitable organisations and strengthened control over religious education (Pierret and Selvik 2009:609). This manoeuvring between positions should also be seen in the context of a limited convergence of interests between the state and Islamic organisations. This was brought about through a growing realization by the Syrian regime that partnerships were required with private sector welfare providers if it was to pursue a policy of gradually retreating from its welfare obligations. In other words there has been a symbiotic if somewhat uncomfortable relationship between non state-sponsored religious actors and the state.

Such a policy is symptomatic of what Stephen Heydemann (2007) has described as “authoritarian upgrading” whereby authoritarian regimes in the Middle East respond to pressures to reform which have arisen as a consequence of increased globalisation and the opening up of economies to neo-liberal practices. A key facet of this is the ability to “appropriate and contain civil societies” (Heydemann 2007:5). Pierret and Selvik (2009:597) writing on

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<sup>162</sup>

Author’s interview with Human Rights Lawyer in Damascus, 27/12/2010

the increased visibility of Sunni welfare organisations, suggest that in the case of Syria the state has only been partially successful. Authoritarian upgrading often involves the emergence of state-sponsored NGOs as risk-free partners for the development of private welfare.<sup>163</sup> Yet in the case of Syria, the links between small and medium-sized merchants and politically independent clergy (which extend to beyond spiritual concerns and are often kin and neighbourhood based ties) marginalizes the influence the state wields over this significant section of private welfare provision (Pierret and Selvik 2009:605-610).

Despite the limits imposed on Sunni charitable associations, they leave a heavy footprint in the humanitarian field. The Union of Charitable Associations in Damascus, a network of predominantly Sunni organisations, co-ordinates welfare activities in the city. Three key projects it operates include the *sundūq al-‘afiyeh* (the health fund); *sundūq al-mawadda wa al-raḥma* (the love and mercy fund) which subsidizes the expenses of getting married, and the *ḥifz al-ni’ma* (the preservation of grace) project which distributes surplus food, clothing and medicine to those in need. In recent years, an indication of the growth in private welfare can be given by the rise in contributions to the *sundūq al-‘afiyeh* which received contributions of 953 million SYP (20.23 million USD) between 1997 and 2007; enabling it to implement around 60,000 surgical procedures (Pierret and Selvik 2009:603). In 2006, the Israeli attack saw tens of thousands of displaced Lebanese seek refuge in Damascus. Some had family networks they could rely on,<sup>164</sup> others found refuge in many of the city’s mosques.<sup>165</sup> The organisational capabilities of the mosques and the *ḥifz al ni’ma* project were called upon to distribute daily food parcels.<sup>166</sup> These examples demonstrate a reach and organisational capacity of Islamic welfare networks that many of the

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<sup>163</sup> The First Lady sponsored Syria Trust is one such example. Another is al-Bostan, an NGO with its headquarters in Lattakia. It is the philanthropic project of Syria’s richest man and first cousin of Bashar al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf.

<sup>164</sup> Author’s conversation with resident of the Zayn al-‘abidīn neighbourhood in Damascus, 18 February 2011.

<sup>165</sup> Author’s interview with Shaykh al-Afyūni at Mujamma’a Kaftāro, Damascus, 10 August 2010.

<sup>166</sup> Author’s conversation with trader from the Midan district of Damascus, 28 July 2010.

international humanitarian organisations<sup>167</sup> in Syria have not been able to access in any meaningful way. The restrictions placed on Sunni Islamic networks, particularly in regard to the Iraqi refugee crisis, mean that the state has created conditions of possibility for other faith actors to emerge. The following section maps the humanitarian field for Iraqi refugees in Damascus.

### 5.5. Protection impasse

Prior to the Iraqi refugee crisis reaching its peak in 2006 following the sectarian attack on the Ali-Al-Askeri shrine in Samar'ā (al-Khalidi and Tanner 2006), UNHCR operations had been minimal in Syria.<sup>168</sup> The scale of the displacement and the incentive of aid-dollars<sup>169</sup> to bolster the welfare obligations of the state pressured the government into allowing foreign NGOs to operate on Syrian territory. A framework allowing the monitoring of international NGO activity was put into place. Memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with the Syrian state were signed by 14 international NGOs (Sassoon 2009). All accredited organisations liaise and report to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which co-ordinates relief assistance for Iraqi refugees.

The MOUs afford the SARC considerable oversight over the activities of international NGOs in the areas of local partnerships and recruitment policies. Thus, though it remains common for the UNHCR to partner church and church affiliated organisations (the Greek Orthodox Patriarchy of Antioch is one such example), there has scarcely been any purposeful collaboration with mosques or Islamic networks.<sup>170</sup> This can also be partly attributed to differing modalities of humanitarian work.<sup>171</sup> International humanitarian organisations including United Nations (UN) agencies simply do not share a common “script” with local

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<sup>167</sup> The author uses this term to encompass UN agencies such as the UNHCR, inter-governmental agencies such as the IOM and international NGOs.

<sup>168</sup> The UNHCR's operational budget jumped nearly seven fold from \$40million in 2005 to \$271million in 2008 (UNHCR 2009b:3).

<sup>169</sup> It has been argued that in fact Syrian state institutions have failed to reap any significant monetary advantage through partnership with international NGOs. See International Crisis Group (2008) *Failed Responsibility: Iraqi refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon*, Middle East Report No.77.

<sup>170</sup> A UNHCR representative told me that although the UNHCR worked with church organisations as implementing partners, there had been “something of a missed opportunity” with Islamic networks and institutions. Interview with UNHCR representative in Damascus, 27 March /2010.

<sup>171</sup> Traditionally, welfare activity in Islam has centred on the redistribution of income through *zakat* (alms), *sadaqah* (voluntary charity), *awqāf* (religious endowments) (Muzaffer 2001) and in the Shi'i tradition- the *Khums* tax.



Islamic faith based welfare service providers (Deneulin & Bano 2009). Instead, they find it easier to engage with churches that have transnational connections with other faith-based international NGOs. As such, church organisations are better positioned to articulate and develop their welfare activities in a secular frame than their Muslim counterparts. Increasingly, in the case of the UNHCR, understandings with local community organisations are mediated through MoSAL (UNHCR 2011b).

Within this framework of co-operation between the state and international humanitarian organisations, Iraqi refugees have been able to access some of the much heralded “protection space” that is the lynchpin of the UNHCR’s current strategy for dealing with urban refugees. Food assistance in partnership with the WFP and the SARC is estimated to reach 87% of the registered Iraqi refugee population (UNHCR 2011a). Iraqi refugees are also able to access primary and secondary healthcare through numerous SARC polyclinics in the city, seven of which are situated in districts with high Iraqi refugee population density. In addition, Iraqi children continue to have access to free primary and secondary education. Financial assistance is restricted to those over 60 years of age and to families who have dependants under the age of 18.

Much of this conceals the precariousness of urban life for Iraqi refugees. It also masks the much contested issue of numbers. I met Dina while she was queuing for her appointment at Mḥabba one morning. She had come to Mḥabba along with her sister to see whether the organisation could contribute part or full payment towards a surgical operation their father required. Mḥabba, Dina told me “is the one place we know where we can get some assistance.” As for the UNHCR, she told me:

Dina: It’s not a humanitarian organisation; they just don’t care. They invite people from Iraq to come and register for resettlement but care nothing for the likes of us who have been here for more than six years. My husband was threatened and there’s no chance we’d go back. I’m not with the UN because a friend told me they may mark my file and close it. If it’s closed, they send you back to Iraq. I don’t want that. Besides, what help do they give aside from out of date biscuits from India?

Refugees like Dina choose to remain undetected by the UNHCR foregoing the assistance that is offered to them. This may be for reasons of fear and distrust of authorities as well as having imprecise ideas regarding services and protection offered through the UNHCR. This leaves rumour and gossip to fill the gaps in information. This is reflected in Dina's fear of being forcibly returned to Iraq and the lack of re-settlement opportunities for Iraqi refugees who have been resident in Syria for a protracted period. Unlike a camp settlement scenario, the dispersal of refugees over a large urban area means they are not obliged to interact with the organisation. In addition, the UNHCR removes from its registered numbers those who no longer access food supplies. Similarly files are deemed inactive if there has been no contact with the organisation for six months. Many refugees, unfamiliar with UNHCR procedures, often lose hope that their case for re-settlement is under consideration and simply stop communicating with the organisation.<sup>172</sup> Farouk, a university lecturer from Baghdad, told me that he had quickly lost any confidence he had in the UNHCR:

Farouk: The UN hasn't provided me with anything. I got here on the 28th of February and the first thing I did – I think it was March 2007 – I went to the UN. As soon as I had rented a house to live in and felt safe in it, the next day, straight away, I went to the UN offices. When I got there, they gave me an appointment to come back and see them after six months. Can you imagine? They gave me an appointment for an interview for the 6th of September that year. So you can imagine, how was I supposed to get any support from these people?

It was only a chance encounter with a nun working with Iraqi refugees that encouraged him to return to the UNHCR to receive psychological counselling for his son one year later. The fall in expectations as to what international humanitarian organisations can do creates a protection impasse. Iraqi refugees find themselves caught between the Syrian state, which has no intention of integrating them into the local community, and international humanitarian organisations which dangle provocatively the “carrot” of third country re-settlement. The latter option has become increasingly remote as foreign

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<sup>172</sup> Often, refugees would ask me whether I had any 'connections' with the UNHCR and whether I could facilitate the referral of their case to the re-settlement department. In many cases, the refugees had not visited the UNHCR offices in Kafr Sousseh since when they had first registered with the organisation. One refugee told me this had been more than three years ago.

embassies and consulates have withdrawn or scaled down their operations since uprisings began in March 2011. For refugees themselves, repatriation to Iraq is not a possibility. Though some engage in shuttle visits to and from Baghdad to collect income from rental properties or state pensions (UNHCR 2009b), many find it inconceivable to return for any length of time.<sup>173</sup> The Baghdad of their memories is no longer the Baghdad of today. Huge concrete barriers divide communities along sectarian lines as an “un-mixing of populations”<sup>174</sup> took place.

Syrian state policy of denying Iraqi refugees the right to work means that many are pushed into competing with Syria's urban poor in the informal labour market, which constitutes 34% of total employment in the country (Aita 2009), for poorly paid jobs in the construction or services sector. As I have written elsewhere, “local integration, for all parties, is off the agenda” (Zaman 2011:273).

Furthermore, the decision to manage without UNHCR assistance, or to supplement it through other means, can be viewed as an expression of the agency of refugees. Alternative mechanisms of survival in the city are triggered. Networks which braid together kin, ethnic and religious ties are mobilised to help deal with the alienation of prolonged exile. Let us now consider how refugees from Iraq position themselves between various international humanitarian organisations, the state and religious networks to produce a particular geography of exile and the meaning they derive from religious traditions.

## **5.6. Widening horizons**

Survival in an urban context means surviving materially and by means of psycho-social and cultural adjustments. Hala is a 58 year old Sunni woman from Baghdad. She lives in the middle class neighbourhood of Muhājirīn with her husband Mahmoud, a 65 year old Physician. Following pervasive levels of

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<sup>173</sup> Iraqi refugees consistently told me that repatriation is a wholly unlikely proposition. Alternative strategies are envisaged where one family member travels onwards from Syria which allows those in Syria to either hope for family re-unification or depend on remittances sent back to Syria.

<sup>174</sup> A phrase attributed to Lord Curzon in reference to the break-up of the Ottoman empire (cited in Marrus 2002:41)

insecurity which culminated in an incident between sectarian militias and the security forces outside the clinic where Mahmoud worked, they decided to depart for Damascus in late 2006. Mahmoud has been fortunate to find employment through a Canadian oil company. However, work means staying away from home at a refinery every other month. The financial security afforded to them through Mahmoud's job means that they are not heavily reliant on the welfare mechanisms afforded to them by the state and the UNHCR. For both Hala and Mahmoud, grappling with their psychological and social well-being is a key concern. Here, courses on basic computer literacy and English, organised and held in community centres run by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in partnership with the UNHCR and the SARC, have been instrumental in widening Hala's social circle and introducing her to other Iraqi women. Equally, her faith has been a key resource in coping with the trauma of displacement and exile:

Hala: I've always felt, but now [my faith] is stronger. I pray more and read the Qur'an a lot more than before. Whatever you need, God is the only thing that is sure. God is there to help you and nothing bad comes from God. It's either from your own deeds but nothing bad from God. So, I feel I'm closer to God [...] everything happens for a reason. God had planned it this way. Even, if you want something so bad and you don't get it, you get so sad then something you never thought about...

Mahmoud: When you're upset you read the verse from the Quran: *wa 'asa an takrahu shayann wa huwa khairun lakum wa 'asa an tḥibbu shayann wa huwa sharrun lakum wallah ya'lamu wa entum la ta'lamūn* (And perhaps you hate something and there is good in it for you, and perhaps you love something and it is evil for you. God alone knows and you – you do not know).

Hala: So, leave it to God. He always gives you something so much better than you could dream of. This helps a lot. It makes everything so much easier.

Tahir: So, you think your faith has helped you in dealing with the situation?

Mahmoud: Definitely

Hala: Of course, of course. If we didn't believe in all this, we would have destroyed ourselves. Everything would be unbearable- because you won't accept anything [...] so you have to be patient. The more you wish and the more you pray, the more you turn to God. If you want you have an answer in this life, it would be there in the second life- you'll find it. You know, I think all the Prophets suffered more than any other people, right? It's not a punishment. Is it a punishment for those Prophets? No –

just to test them. The more you are patient, the more you remember God.

Hala and Mahmoud's appeal to religious moral authority and scripture reveals an alternative framework for understanding their experience of displacement. Hala's suffering, like that of the Prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, provides a means for reconciling the disjuncture and loss incurred through the process of displacement with a reliance on a just and merciful God. For Hala and Mahmoud, religion is more than just a personal conversation with God. It is, as Tweed (2006:62) reminds us, about "build(ing) and inhabit(ing) worlds. It is home-making." However, the constraints set by the state outlined earlier means that the construction of such a world takes innovative and unexpected forms (Beckford 1989). Frustrated at not being able to find an Islamic network or institution that works with Iraqi refugees through the contacts she made at the DRC operated community centres, Hala began volunteering at the Kanīset al-Salīb (Church of the Cross). The church runs a project headed by an outreach worker from the UNHCR, involving both Syrians and Iraqis. The project aims to train Iraqi volunteers to provide outreach work to elderly Iraqi refugees. I asked Hala what had drawn her to volunteering at the church:

Hala: You see, look, we're sitting here doing nothing, but when you feel you are doing something for somebody else you don't think about yourself any more. You think about others; they're worse off than you are and you are thankful to God for what you have and that you are blessed with the good health and capacity to help someone else. So, I think it's, I don't know I believe whatever you do now, you'll see a reward in the future. I mean you have to. I don't know; it's a very strong feeling.

Tahir: So taking part in this course, how has it helped you? What does it mean?

Hala: I feel much better; I feel at least I'm doing something even if it's a small thing. You visit a family and they feel that somebody is trying to help them; other people are thinking about them. This is enough, even if it's a small part. I try to find people who can help them financially. I ask friends; I contacted a friend through facebook and told her if she wanted to help these people, she could consider it as *zakāt*. So this helps. You should have seen the families that I visited today. Oh My God. There was one family the conditions they were living in were appalling; the humidity was unbearable [mid-March]. The woman is sick – I think it's a cancer or something. As soon as we went in, we couldn't stay for more than five minutes. All the members of this family were getting more and more sick by the day. I don't know how they could live in such an apartment.

This example serves to illustrate the relative positions refugees, international humanitarian organisations, religious institutions, international agencies and the state all take up in the humanitarian field. Here, Hala has re-mapped her religious landscape to include church organisations in lieu of any similar such project being available through Islamic networks and institutions. The fact that the project is led by a UN outreach worker once again demonstrates the privileged position church organizations enjoy in the humanitarian field in Syria. It is also worth noting that her positioning in relation to the church is for her psycho-social well-being rather than for any access to any material resources. Her allusion to a “future reward” also points to Hala being cognizant of the “trans-temporal” dimension to her actions (Tweed 2006) which belong as much to another realm as they do to this corporeal world.

Hala’s testimony challenges Bourdieu’s insistence that social actors and their practice ought to be interpreted as part of an on-going game to amass capital or more precisely a capital that is only of value in this world. For bodies inscribed with a religious disposition, Bourdieu’s field of power omits a very obvious and powerful actor: God. For bodies inscribed with a religious disposition, relationships are cultivated and calibrated with other actors in order to be closer to God. It is not that Bourdieu’s use of capital as a metaphor for the structuring of society is problematic;<sup>175</sup> it is the fact that for Bourdieu, time comes to an abrupt and sudden end with death. For those who believe, time extends beyond death – an afterlife beckons. As such, as the believer strives to acquire or amass a specific volume and structure of capital, she does so with this in mind. Once again, the material/spiritual dichotomy falls woefully short in adequately interpreting the lived-experiences and cultural landscape of religiously-oriented Iraqi refugees.

Mahmoud later expressed disappointment tinged with resignation at the lack of involvement on the part of Islamic networks and institutions in humanitarian work with refugees, once again revealing the reach of the state in delineating

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<sup>175</sup> The message of the Islam came first to the people of Makkah who were well-known for being traders. Thus, it is not surprising that the Qur’an continuously refers to commerce and trade as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Mankind. Believers are reminded time and again to “spend in the way of God”. See The Noble Qur’an 2:195; 2:261; 2:265.

which activities in both the humanitarian and the religious fields are acceptable. This clearly impacts on which relationships Iraqi refugees (particularly Muslim Iraqi refugees) are able to nurture. Relationships with Syrian co-religionists based on ties of solidarity offered through religion are off limits. This severely constrains potential for “home-making”. He told me:

Mahmoud: Here, you have the support of the UN and they don't care if you are Muslim or not. Anyone can go and register. But, the churches here, they support the Christians - maybe because they are a minority here. Usually in societies where you are in a minority, you have more support from your people [...] Here they collect money in the mosques, but you know it's usually to build another mosque in Syria or for the support of students in Islamic centres. Sometimes, the Imam at the end of the Friday prayer makes an announcement for donations for mosques being built in areas far away like Qamishli or Deir Ezzour. I think they have to get permission from the government for doing that, I mean they can't do it otherwise. If you want to do something similar for Iraqi refugees you have to get permission. I heard there was a group of Iraqis who met with a shaykh who talked publicly about refugee issues and they were told you would need permission from the government – you can't just do it here. Unless it's a personal donation you can't just give your *zakāt* as an organised donation.

Interestingly, *zakāt*, which I had identified in Chapter One as being a possible resource for forcibly displaced people, is not recognized as such by Hala and Mahmoud. Their own financial circumstances dictate that *they* must pay *zakāt* to those less fortunate than themselves. Thus, *zakāt* is first and foremost for vulnerable populations who are most in need. The eligibility of the category of *‘ābir al-sabīl* for receipt of *zakāt* depends on the current financial circumstances she finds herself in.

The following case study reflects on how Palestinian Iraqis from Baghdad, through establishing their own community organisation in Damascus, have been able to position themselves between the state and international humanitarian organisations to better access resources.

### **5.7. A network of self reliance**

As I have shown, the Syrian state works considerably hard at curbing the influence of Sunni organisations. This can be partly attributed to the fraught relationship between the Ba'thist regime that has permeated Syrian politics and society since Hafez al-Assad launched his war on the Muslim brotherhood in

Hama in the early 1980s (Seale 1988). Although there has been a *détente* between the state and less pliant sections of the Sunni religious establishment in recent years (Pierret & Selvik 2009), difference remains a potent issue in Syrian politics. This is associated with a policy of the regime which portrays the latter as a bulwark of Sunni hegemony and protector of minority rights while simultaneously encouraging sectarian politics through the privileging of certain groups. In such an environment some community organisations prefer not to highlight the faith dimension to the work they do. One such organisation is the Rābeta al-Falastīniyi al-'Iraq (Palestinian Iraqi Community Association).<sup>176</sup>

Far less has been written on the Palestinian Iraqi community than on other Palestinian populations in the region. This dearth in literature can be attributed to the relatively small number of Palestinian Iraqis (Mohammad 2007) and the difficulties associated with doing research during the Ba'thist chapter in Iraq's history (Harling 2010, Chatelard 2011). Around 77% of the 4280 individuals who were originally displaced during the 1948 *nakba*, originated from the neighbouring villages of Ijzim, 'Ayn Ghazal and Jab'a (Mohammad 2007:23). As such, many of the survivors of the *nakba* and their descendants, who have now sought refuge in Damascus, are tied by bonds of kinship and relationships which extend as far back as at least three generations.

The Rābeta is an example of how refugees, as active social agents, are able to establish community structures that promote self-reliance. The organisation was founded in May 2006 in response to the needs of Palestinian Iraqis in Syria, in particular the situation of the Palestinian Iraqis who were stranded at the border camps (Amnesty International 2008). Its membership reflects the diversity of Palestinian politics in the Diaspora, with members from Hamas, Fatah, PFLP, Hizb al-Ba'th and independents. The premises at which the community centre is based is marked by the lack of symbols belonging to political factions. In their stead, the Palestinian flag and a map of historic Palestine hang on the walls.

Over the past three decades religion, identity and politics have become increasingly entwined in the Palestinian context (Lybarger 2007). The Director

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<sup>176</sup> Henceforth referred to as the Rābeta.



of the Rābeta is affiliated to Hamas, an Islamist political organisation.<sup>177</sup> Some members declare themselves to be staunchly secular, while others tread a more intermediate line, observing religious commitments while maintaining their religious affiliations have little to do with politics. Many members, who are refugees themselves, line up every day in congregation for prayer in the main reception hall at the centre, irrespective of their political affiliations. Weekly seminars on religious instruction are organised for women by female members of the Rābeta. The community centre acts as an assembly hall for marriage ceremonies as well as gatherings on the occasion of religious festivities. Communal fasts are broken during Ramadan at the centre.<sup>178</sup> Yet, Abu al-Hassan (the Director) and other members of the Rābeta are adamant in their refusal to label themselves as an FBO. For them, to label themselves as an FBO is to confess sectarian attitudes. Given that sectarianism was a key trigger in the displacement of Iraqi refugees (al-Khalidi et.al. 2007), it is perhaps unsurprising that they would recognize themselves as such. At the same time, there is a clear acknowledgement that faith is a key motivating factor of those who have built the centre. Abu al-Hassan told me:

Abu al-Hassan: Helping people is fundamental to our religion [...] It's something important to us as a charitable organization that we keep ties with people out of duty to our faith and in addition to being Palestinian Iraqi, as well as being Muslims, not to mention from the perspective of being refugees. So, really, it's fundamentally what religion is about; to co-operate with and support people through our good conduct and behaviour, and our customs. This is something that comes about naturally because first of all, you help your brother and don't leave him hungry while you have had your fill. Secondly, you have genuine concern for the welfare of your brother. The metaphor is that of Muslims being one body, if a part hurts, the whole body will feel the pain. Look, if we at the Rābeta see a Palestinian from Iraq suffering, we feel a responsibility towards him.

For Abu al-Hassan, action and not only belief is what lies at the core of being religious. It is about transforming a disposition to believe into a disposition to

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<sup>177</sup> At the time of conducting fieldwork Hamas had long enjoyed a positive working relationship with the Syrian regime which has hosted its political bureau in Damascus. This relationship was predicated on both Hamas and Syria being at the forefront of the *muqawama* or resistance against Israeli hegemony in the region. Recent events in Syria have seen Hamas relocate their offices to Doha and Cairo. Interview with the Director of the Rabeta al-Falastinyi al-'Iraq in Mukhayim al-Yarmouk, Damascus, 5 July 2010.

<sup>178</sup> Author's observations between October 2010 and March 2011.

act: it is a practical understanding of religion. His assertion that religion is about “supporting people through our good conduct and behaviour” is a reference to a *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. This points to an interpretation of religion which collapses the Durkheimian binary of sacred and profane.<sup>179</sup> If as Abu al-Hassan understands it, religion includes everyday interactions and relationships with people then the sacred is clearly not “[some]thing set apart”. Instead, the ordinary is continually sacralised.<sup>180</sup> What is surprising is that the phrase *al-din al-mu’āmla* (religion is the good treatment of people) was a persistent refrain I heard from Syrians and Iraqis alike from across *all* faiths. This widespread formulation of religion can be attributed to the shared existences of the many different faith communities that live in Damascus; creating a recognition of shared cultural practices, history, memories and language. Moreover, it is recognition of “a local cosmopolitanism” (Zubaida 1999, Chatty 2010:295) where “the other” is not strange but familiar.

The Rābeta, through the nurturing of collective relations with Palestinian Syrian political actors has been able to successfully negotiate, with both the state and the UNHCR, the closing of the Tanf camp that straddled the Iraqi Syrian border. In addition it has secured fast track third country resettlement for Palestinian Iraqis registered at al-Hol camp in Hassake. Importantly, it has also negotiated temporary residency permits for Palestinian Iraqis in Damascus. Though these have been important victories, recent events in Syria have stalled the re-settlement process for many. In light of this, it is perhaps in the psycho-social impact that the Rābeta has had on the lives of Palestinian Iraqi refugees that we can catch a glimpse of the salience of such an organisation. Abu Yaseen, a 50 year old teacher who heads the youth programme at the centre and often contributes to comment pieces on the Rābeta website told me:

Abu Yaseen: The Rābeta is a house for all Palestinians coming from Iraq because it compensates you for all that you lost in Iraq with moral support. That is what it does fundamentally. Every other week we gather

<sup>179</sup> See footnote no.32 in Chapter One for how the sacred and profane are understood in Islamic tradition.

<sup>180</sup> This is supported in the *ḥadīth* literature. Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, said, “Faith has seventy-some doors, the lowest of which is to remove something harmful from the road, and the highest of which is to testify that there is no god but Allah” (Sunan At-Tirmidh, Book of Faith, Number 2614).

together to go to the Nabulsi mosque in Rukn ad-Din to pray Friday congregation prayers there and listen to the sermon by Muhammad Rātib al Nabulsi. So, we feel this sense of community of going together and of praying together at a mosque. We often meet at the Rābeta to talk with our brothers about our situation in Syria; to hear news about relatives who are abroad- what is happening in their lives. Such and such is ill or such and such is getting married. In addition there are sporting activities, cultural activities to keep you occupied; to make you forget this feeling of being away from home and being a refugee.

The ritual of prayer, both on the premises of the Rābeta and organised visits to the mosques of well known preachers, creates a sense of solidarity and an appreciation of the moral commitments individuals have to one another. In prayer, time moves beyond this world and crosses into expectations of another world. For Abu Yaseen, prayer allows him to re-orient himself following the dislocation of exile; to forget that he is a refugee. However, the practice of prayer is not continuous. It has its fixed times. To remind oneself of the moral commitments one has to others means to visit the sick and share concern in the well-being of others. "Acts of worship, whatever they might be," Durkheim (2001:171) tells us, "are not futile and meaningless gestures. By seeming to strengthen the ties between the worshipper and his God, they really strengthen the ties that bind individuals to society." The testimony of my participants suggests that the inverse is true: by attending to relationships with others, the relationship between a devotee and her God is strengthened. This is what the Rābeta enables Palestinian Iraqi refugees in Damascus to do. Abu Yaseen's allusion to Rābeta as being a recognizable domestic space is significant to understanding the Rābeta as an FBO once we accept that religion is essentially concerned with home-making. This is a theme explored in much greater depth in the following chapter.

Maysa, a 33 year old Palestinian Iraqi who had worked as a project co-ordinator for an American NGO in Baghdad was similarly appreciative of the Rābeta. She told me:

Maysa: Any person who is foreign, a migrant or a refugee needs a place which can be a centre for meeting with other people – just so that they can find out about what happened to other people from their community. How do we find out about others? We turn to the Rābeta. It's like a

mother to us; like when you have difficulties you turn to your mother. We're all the same.

The use of the metaphors of “home” and “mother” to describe the relationship with the Rābeta is a telling one. It casts light on how embedded the organisation is in the lives of the refugees. The Rābeta does not enjoy the financial assets of international humanitarian organisations, nor is it a preferred partner of international humanitarian organisations in the way that a church based organisation is. Its strength lies in its ability to position itself among other Palestinian political actors and to mobilise those particular networks to secure further resources. In being a network of self-reliance it allows refugees to be active and purposive decision makers.

## **Conclusion**

Damascus provides an interesting urban setting in which societal relations unfold. For Iraqi forced migrants, a humanitarian space has been established which effectively governs their lives. The state, international humanitarian organisations and local faith based actors all compete in the structuring of the humanitarian field. The state enjoys discriminatory powers through both the Law and memorandums of understanding with humanitarian organisations which delineates the possibilities of action for local faith based actors.

I have demonstrated that, due to the specific socio-political context of Syria, mainstream Sunni charitable organisations have been sidelined from attending to the needs of the Iraqi refugee population in Damascus. Moreover, international humanitarian organisations are more likely to engage with church affiliated organisations (which enjoy a privileged status vis-à-vis the state) as the transnational nature of church affiliated organisations means they share a closer vernacular of humanitarian action.

A less informed reading of the humanitarian field in Damascus might suggest that FBOs are marginal to the lives of Iraqi refugees in Damascus. However, to think so would to err on two counts. Firstly, it fails to take into account the specifically authoritarian character of the Syrian regime and the pervasive impact it has on the structuring of the humanitarian field. Secondly, it would

overlook the agency of refugees themselves. Iraqi refugees are under immense pressure with the traditional durable solutions to the plight of refugee populations seemingly out of reach. Return to Iraq is highly improbable given the continued sectarian violence there. The Syrian regime has clearly indicated that local integration is off the agenda and resettlement opportunities to a third country are few and far between. This has created what I call a protection impasse for Iraqi forced migrants in Damascus. It is in this context that Iraqi forced migrants are compelled to reflect upon their specific experiences of religion and to mobilize them in novel and unexpected ways. I suggest that they have done so by re-exploring their cultural and religious landscapes to engage with faith actors from outside their own faith group. This, I argue, has been possible largely because of a recognition of an entwined existence that faith communities have in relation to one another in Damascus. This allows “the other” to be framed as familiar rather than strange.

In the case of the Rābeta we saw how refugees have created their own vehicles to express faith, allowing them to inhabit a world of their own construction rather than one which is wholly contingent on others. The Rābeta creates and becomes a space for Palestinian Iraqis to practise their faith through the nurturing of relationships, enabling them to participate in “home-making” despite the constraints set on them by the state and the UNHCR.

## Chapter Six

### Home Sacred Home

*'A'isha reported Allah's Messenger as saying: "Gabriel impressed upon me [kind treatment] towards the neighbour [so much] that I thought as if he would confer upon him [the right of] inheritance." <sup>181</sup>*

#### Introduction

Utilizing ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with Iraqi forced migrants the following chapter draws attention to the manifold ways religion serves to orient them in Damascus following their displacement. If we take the process of displacement to mean the loss of capabilities required for an individual to function integrally in an accustomed environment then emplacement ought to be viewed as a strategy to regain such capabilities albeit in changed circumstances. Building on Tweed's (2006) twin tropes of crossing and dwelling as metaphors for religious practice and experience, I cast additional light on the relational and inter-subjective aspects of home-making which are central to the process of emplacement.

In what follows I consider the extent to which Syria ought to be conceptualised as a familiar space for Iraqi forced migrants, wherein cultural practices including religious ones are sustained and realized through social and kin networks in the context of a new urban setting with its attendant relations to the state. I also propose that communal "home-like spaces" are produced and inhabited by Iraqi forced migrants as a means to aggregate and add to existing non material forms of capital to access further material resources. Finally, I explore how the familial home continues to function as a sacred space for Iraqi refugees. I suggest that all three modes of home suggested here: domestic dwellings, community organisations and the city constitute key spaces inscribed with religious significance which help orient Iraqi forced migrants in the wake of displacement.

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<sup>181</sup>

Sahīh Muslim Book 032, Number 6354

### 6.1. Broken homes

Conflict induced violence and forced migration are key contributors to social transformation; communities are left fragmented; economic resources usurped or destroyed; and traditional ways of life are re-examined and interpreted anew. Camino & Krulfeld (1994:ix) posit: “the refugee experience is a complex process characterised by loss and regeneration.” Other scholars in the field of Refugee Studies have highlighted that one of the most significant consequences of the process of forced displacement is “social disarticulation” (Cernea 1996:22) brought about through disintegration of “cultural communities” (Moore and Shellman 2004:728). The loss and attempt to retrieve, re-create or perhaps even re-shape the vital cultural resources which constitute the relational home lie at the heart of the decision-making, religious practices and beliefs of Iraqi refugees in Damascus. David Turton (2005:278) reminds us that “the experience of displacement is not only about the *loss* of place, and the pain and bereavement this entails. It is also, inevitably, about the struggle to *make* a place in the world.” And so, with every fragmentation comes a re-imagining of community; with the destruction of economic resources come changes in livelihood strategies; and with the re-examination of traditional social structures are born new perceptions of identity and belonging.

To help understand how refugees straddle this continuum of loss and regeneration, I suggest that much can be learned from the field of welfare economics, and in particular the work of Amartya Sen and his notion of “entitlements”. Primarily concerned with the political economy of hunger, Sen argues that famines are a construct not only of supply-side problems but more importantly, famines are brought about through a failure of what he terms ‘entitlements’. “The entitlement of a person” Sen (1995:52-53) tells us:

stands for the different set of alternative commodity bundles that the person can acquire through the use of various legal channels of acquirement to someone in his position..[and] is determined by his original ownership (what is called his 'endowment') and the various bundles he can acquire starting retrospectively from each initial

endowment, through the use of trade and production (what is called his exchange entitlement mapping).

For Sen, famine ensues where there is a change to an individual's endowment perhaps through the loss of health or where one becomes alienated from one's land. Alternatively, starvation can be brought about by a change in the exchange entitlement mapping of an individual through a loss in earnings; unemployment or a hike in inflation.

If we are to interpret Sen in the light of forced migration studies, I would suggest that the endowment of an Iraqi forced migrant (that is to say the cultural, economic and social resources she has at her disposal) has been severely depleted and is faced with further erosion as she finds her ability to maintain her endowment is diminished through restrictions placed on her in finding work, the rising costs of day to day living and the lack of access to social security provisions (Sen 1981:4). The entitlements available to an Iraqi forced migrant are therefore composed of legal, social and cultural resources which she can mobilize to maintain a minimum adequate level of subsistence, subsistence here implies not only the material sense, but social and cultural also. To better illustrate how Sen's entitlement approach can be understood in the context of refugee studies let us consider the following example.

Bassam is a tailor whose workshop is situated off the narrow and dusty side streets of Sayyida Zayneb. His mannerisms, gait and appearance belie a man burdened with anxiety. The cumulative stress of living under a corrosive sanctions regime followed by the American invasion and occupation of Iraq has left Bassam suffering from alopecia; completely bald and with no eyebrows to frame his features he has an almost haunted countenance. A man forever chased by ghosts – past, present and future. Hunched over his sewing machine his conversation is punctured with deep contemplative silences, accentuated as the motorized needle from his sewing machine falls silent. His work space is a small cramped room of no more than 80 square feet. For the most part, he works on the loose fitting outer garment worn by women – the *abaya*. On a free standing clothes rail there are 20 such garments; all in black. The one



distinguishing feature is the slight embroidery work on the neck line and the cuffs of the sleeves. A framed picture of Bassam standing outside one of the gates leading to the Kabah at Makkah in *ihram*<sup>182</sup> adorns the wall to the right of his sewing machine. On the left wall is a large framed calligraphy piece of the *Ayat al-Kursi*.<sup>183</sup> Bassam told me had been forced to seek refuge in Syria in the wake of the immense pressures that the occupation brought with it. Here, it is worth quoting extensively from what Bassam told me to better capture a sense of the entitlement failure he experienced. I had begun by asking him what he remembered of the American invasion and occupation:

Bassam: The nightly air raid bombings and the rocket attacks wouldn't let us ever sleep. On top of that the street was terrifying. There was killing and pillaging on the street. You couldn't possibly go out to the market or take your children out. My youngest child had an asthma attack one night, and we had to get him to the hospital to get some oxygen to help him breathe. It was three o'clock at night and he was suffocating in front of me. I had to get him to the hospital. At that time of night there was no one but Americans on the street. Anyone who went out would risk getting killed. I had no choice – I had to get my son to the hospital to save his life. They stopped me and asked me where I was going. I told them what I could and they could see that my wife was in tears and my son was in difficulty. I was terrified they'd take me away. Do you know what happens when a woman and a child are on the street at that time of night? I knew that I had to get them to the hospital so that I felt I was able to do something. When we got to the hospital, we had to wait for two hours. When our turn came they said they had run out of oxygen. This was a state run hospital, for poor people like us. I mean where were we supposed to go? What if something had happened? Who would have been responsible? The hospitals didn't have painkillers or oxygen. If you wanted that you had to go back out to the pharmacies. What chance is there for poor citizens like us? We're left at their mercy.

After that things got even worse. You had gangs and terrorist groups, al-Qaeda and other criminals killing whoever was different from them. There was killing, pillaging and looting- you couldn't step outside. There were some streets you couldn't go down. They'd call these streets the “street of death” or “the final street” because if you passed through those streets you'd get killed. The markets would close by noon. You couldn't find anyone out on the street [after that]. There were curfews from six in the

<sup>182</sup>

Pilgrims to the kabah are required to be in a state of sacredness. For male pilgrims, the ritual of pilgrimage requires that they wear two sheets of un-stitched cloth as their garment. One sheet is wrapped around the lower half of the body, the other is wrapped and draped over a shoulder covering the upper part of the body. The *ihram* robes are said to signify the equality of all men before God.

<sup>183</sup>

The verse of the Throne. Verse 255 of *Sura al-Baqara* in the Quran. It is widely memorized and is commonly said to protect the one who recites it from the evil eye. The verse is an emphatic expression of God's power and dominion over the universe.

evening till six o'clock the following morning. There was no money, no work. How were we supposed to get on with our lives? There was a lot of pressure on us. I used to have a store and it was burned down. After, my brothers were killed in the space of six months. One had five children and the other had three. I had started working as a cook for a local Iraqi force called the Iraqi liberation force. They were getting supplies and weapons from the Americans. I only worked with them as a cook on and off for a couple of months- maybe three. I got a threat posted through the door of my store to stop working with them. There were four other stores that got the same threat. The other thing was that we were in a mixed area. We were Shi'i in a Sunni controlled area. So, the threat was both specific and general. For two of the store-owners it wasn't just a threat. They were killed straight away. I knew I had to leave straight away. Another thing is that my daughter was nearly kidnapped from secondary school. Luckily, she had been inside the school when the bus left. They had stopped the bus and taken whoever was on it. Because of this, I made her leave school- to stop attending. Everything was against us in Baghdad; the threats, the killing of my brothers and [having] nowhere to live. That's why we were forced to seek refuge in Syria. Of course, Syria has been great in embracing Iraqis and treating us well, so much so that we think of this as our second country. But still, we suffer a lot with the difficulties of earning a living and having to pay high rents.

It is clear that in the aftermath of the American invasion the capability of ordinary Iraqis such as Bassam to lead his life culturally, socially and materially were denuded to such an extent that there was a threat to the integrity of living his life in any meaningful way; the option of staying in Iraq had become, in effect, a Hobson's choice. The coda from the above extract points to the significance of Syria as a familiar space. Bassam recognizes that in Syria he does not feel completely alienated. However, he does acknowledge the hardships that accompany displacement even to a recognizable environment. Bassam, like many Iraqi refugees in Damascus, works in the informal sector. The workspace and machine Bassam uses is owned by a Syrian businessman. Bassam manages to earn around 150 SYP (just over \$3) per day working as a tailor. On arrival to Damascus, finding work was an imperative. Bassam told me that he had worked at a number of similar workshops often for short periods as the pay was insufficient to cover daily expenditure for food and rent. A working day would usually last 14 hours. To supplement his income and apply for re-settlement to a third country, Bassam registered with the UNHCR from whom he receives much needed food assistance. He told me of his difficulty when he first arrived:

Bassam: I had gone a while without work and we weren't getting any food assistance at the time. There were some families that helped us with some necessities so that we could get on with our lives. I was forced to do any kind of work just to earn 100SYP so that we could get by and have something to eat. I would start one job and then leave and it's only recently that I feel a bit more settled with the job I have now. I'm not shy in doing any kind of work. As far as I'm concerned, work is honourable. I said to myself I had to find work so that I didn't have to ask anyone for anything.

This is a typical scenario for Iraqi refugees in Damascus. In a recent survey of 813 Iraqi refugee households in Syria, Doocy et.al. (2011) found that 61% of the 366 adults who reported to be employed were working under short term contracts. 60% of employed adults also reported working for small businesses with an average working week of 59 hours. Income from all sources including remittances and paid employment averaged at \$97 per capita per month (ibid.)

Of his two children, one is registered at a Syrian primary school. This facilitates the provision of a temporary residency permit for the family (UNHCR 2010). His other daughter had to leave midway through secondary school in order to care for her 35 year old mother who suffers from both polyarthritis and chronic diabetes which has impaired her sight. Under such conditions there does not seem to be the prospect of a reasonable future for Bassam and his family. He told me:

Bassam: For five years of my life I've been suffering. We don't have a future and in Iraq our destination is unknown. We don't want anything other than to live in peace and to raise our children in the best way we can. That's it. Everyone tastes death at some point. There's no escaping that. I just want to be settled and not to remain in this situation. We're suspended; not being able to return to our country and not knowing if we can move to another country. For that reason we're suspended between the sky and the earth (*ehna mu'allaqīn bayn al-sama' wal 'ard*). You're not settled either in Iraq or here and you don't know how long you will stay here [...] when I say settled, I mean settled at work, as a family, I mean as a human being. I want to be settled so I know where I stand. What will happen to my children? God forbid something happens to me, who will guarantee their future? No-one. It's the one reason keeping me alive.

Bassam's concerns and anxieties are typical of many Iraqi refugees in Damascus. The increased likelihood of protracted exile where the traditional durable solutions of return, local integration and re-settlement have become

less and less available combined with the Syrian state maintaining strict supervision over NGOs means that religion takes on critical significance in the lives of Iraqi refugees. It is in this context that religion as a cultural resource assumes an integral role in the development of social networks and as a means of meeting psycho-social needs at both individual and collective levels. Bassam's emphasis on wanting to be "settled at work, as a family" and "as a human being" draws our attention to the intersections between subjective concerns about what it means to be fully human and more prosaic demands. He alludes to his current situation as being a kind of purgatory, suspended in a liminal space between this world and the next.

Haidar, a former employee of the Ministry of Health prior to the invasion, now working as a dentist at a clinic affiliated to one of the many Shi'i clergy represented in Sayyida Zayneb recalled Bassam's sentiments. Unlike Bassam, Haidar had left his family behind in Iraq<sup>184</sup>. Life continues to be challenging in Syria:

Haidar: We don't have any choice but to be patient and trust in fate. There is nothing for us but to seek patience and refuge in Allah the most High. There is no alternative. They [my daughters] can't escape to here – living here is too difficult. The situation for others in Iraq is just as bad. You can't find a salary, you can't find enough money to live off and you have to survive by relying on relatives and friends.

In the following section, I shall reflect on the ways in which refugees such as Bassam and "Haidar 'seek refuge and patience in Allah". In particular, I explore understandings of home and family and consider how religion informs these understandings and to what extent religion plays a role in the process of emplacement.

## **6.2. Home-making and half-built homes.**

"Religions", Tweed (2006:54) tells us, "are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries". As can be seen by the use of the

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<sup>184</sup> For more on migration as a family strategy see Chatelard, G. (2008) A Quest for Family Protection: The Fragmented Social Organisation of Transnational Iraqi Migration. Keynote Speech to the Conference: 'Displacement and Dispossession: Forced Migration in Africa and the Middle East'. British Academy, London 28 March 2008.

plural for religion, the definition aims for universality. To his credit, Tweed (2006:14) reminds us that the word theory is derived from the Greek noun *theōria* to mean sighting and as such is subject to blind-spots (2006:15). It is therefore a positioned sighting; illuminating specific areas while casting a shadow over others. In the previous chapter we saw one such example of a blind spot in how Tweed neglects to situate religious actors within the field of power. Despite this, a theory of religions such as Tweed's can help us towards understanding the practices of Iraqi forced migrants. In particular, the idea of spatial practices – dwelling and crossing – opens up avenues in understanding how religious resources (both material and spiritual) are mobilized, as he put it, “to intensify joy and confront suffering”.

In Chapter Four, I examined religion diachronically; that is through foregrounding the experiences and interactions of my participants with other religious actors over time. In this chapter I shift the focus of attention to the spatial, and in particular the home, as a springboard from which to examine religious practices. This, I suggest enables us to be better positioned to illuminate the process of reciprocity and degree of integration between religious, social, political, economical and cultural fields. Kim Knott (2005:23) in “The Location of Religion” concurs. She makes the point that “the spaces of religion are synchronically dynamic because at any time they are overlapping, co-existent, in parallel with other spaces and because they are internally in tension, being made up of multiple, contested, real and imagined sites and relations.” In Chapter Five we saw how, between the actions of the state and international agencies in relation to refugees in the humanitarian field, the potential for “home-making” for the latter is constrained. The turn to a spatial analysis begs the question: what does it actually mean to “make homes”?

Tweed (2006:97) asserts that those who ascribe to a religious world-view are guided by “autocentric” and “allocentric” reference frames. The former can be equated with a concern for the care of the self whereas the latter refers to concern with that which is external of oneself. These reference frames enable those who ascribe to religious beliefs and practices to orient themselves

temporally and spatially by placing their bodies within homes, homelands and the cosmos. He posits:

“Religious women and men construct habitats, intimate spaces for dwelling, and inscribe those homes with religious significance. Moving beyond those intimate spaces and the kin who inhabit them, individuals and groups draw on religion to negotiate collective identity, imagine the group's shared space, and – in the process – establish social hierarchies within the group and generate taxonomies of others beyond it [...] Religions also imagine the wider terrestrial landscape and the ultimate horizon of existence – the universe and the beings that inhabit it.”

Here, the definition of home offered by Tweed seemingly begins with the bounded notion of a constructed habitat, emphasising the material importance of home. The phrase “intimate spaces for dwelling” is more promising as it offers a hint at the temporal and relational aspects of home-making. Home can be located beyond the boundaries of domestic space. It can be found in what I call “home-like spaces”. Again, emphasizing relational aspects of home, “home-like spaces” are those wherein relations other than family relations are established: they may be community centres, schools or even mosques.

Students at the Iraqi student Project (ISP) were asked what motivates people to pray. Their answers were recorded in a book<sup>185</sup> produced by the ISP entitled: *The River, The Roof, The Palm Tree: Young Iraqi Refugees Remember their Home*. One of the students, Salim, had written:

The mosque is prepared in a way that feels like home. The floor is covered with soft carpets and there is a calm peaceful light. The prayer in its essence elicits peace and harmony. A literal connection between us is found during the prayer. We stand in line so close together that the shoulders and the feet (without shoes) of each one willingly touch the ones on either side, not only in the standing position, but also in the

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<sup>185</sup> Each Friday, Theresa Kubasak, co-founder of the ISP, facilitates a Writers' workshop which encourages the craft of creative writing in English. The book contains extracts from essays, poems and reflections which were created in response to a prompt. Somewhat fortuitously, I was invited to a writers' workshop the very week they were discussing matters pertaining to faith and belief.

postures of bending over, kneeling and the movement of the hands. The inspiring recitations of the Quran [sic.], the emotive speech of the Imam, the neighbourhood gathering, the congruent and harmonious movement of the prayer and the precise connection of shoulders are all the wonders of the congregational Friday noon prayer. It elicits a sense of devotion and belonging, a feeling of unity and shelter. It's a religious duty yet a personal need. Without the zeal of experiencing it, one feels loneliness and a sense of something missing. It's one great migration to peace (ISP 2011:40).

The original question had been posed by a visitor to the Umayyad mosque in central Damascus who was struck by the sheer number of people attending Friday prayers. Those familiar with the Umayyad mosque would recognize it as more than merely a place of prayer. The pristine, polished courtyard to the mosque is a haven for working class families seeking to escape the crowded quarters in which they live. It functions as a family picnic site much like a London park in the height of an English summer. Children run boisterously amok, chasing one another, sliding across the tiled floor mimicking the celebrations of footballing heroes from far way Madrid and Barcelona. Families sit in small circles in whatever shade they can find. Laughter and chatter fills the courtyard. In the mosque, between prayers, small groups of men sit in quiet conversation. Others are simply stretched out on the carpet, catching a quiet afternoon snooze. It has the feel of a lazy Sunday afternoon; as Salim notes, "the mosque is prepared in a way that feels like home". In prayer, it is the neighbourhood gathering which elicits communal feelings: the recognition of familiar everyday faces from the street on which one lives. The unity of movement in prayer where the faithful are physically linked to one another banishes any sense of alienation. In that moment, there is what Tweed sees as the crossing of boundaries as the believer locates herself within wider world[s]. Or as Salim puts it: a "great migration to peace".

### **6.3. Sacralising the home**

Other theorists of religion have also written extensively on spatial aspects of religion and the sacred (Kong 1993, Metcalf 1996, Park 2005, Knott 2005). The

question I ask is how do Iraqi refugees inscribe their homes with religious significance? I contend that the “spatial turn” in social theory can offer promising insights into the ways in which religion configures relations between social actors and with it take an opportunity to clarify key spatial terms.

In the geographer Doreen Massey's (1991) sketch of her local neighbourhood, she walks us through her local high street in north-west London to conjure a “global sense of place”. Here, in contrast to Harvey's (1990) notion of time-space compression, relations of all kinds – be they political, social, cultural or economic – are stretched out over space. In doing so, Massey (1991:28). proffers an alternative interpretation of place. She argues:

what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus [...] instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated movements in networks of social relations and undertakings.

Home is one such place. Surveying the literature on the idea of home, it is unsurprising that it is often conceived in largely material and spatial terms. An example of such is given by the eminent anthropologist Mary Douglas (1993:263) who tells us that home “does not need bricks and mortar, it can be a wagon, a caravan, a boat or a tent. It need not be a large space, but space there must be.” Elsewhere, other forays into the religious significance of domestic spaces emphasise the house rather than home (Kong 1991, Campo 1991).

Tamara Hareven (1993) traces the genealogy of the notion of the “family home” in post-industrial countries of the West. She finds that the construct of a family home, that is home as a space exclusively for the family, was an “invention of the middle classes” (Hareven 1993:258). Speaking of pre-industrial society, she tells us (1993:239) that in addition to the obvious familial functions, a plethora of activities linked the home to the wider environment; such that the home served “as a site of production, as a welfare agency and correctional institution, as an



educational institution and as *a place for religious worship*" (emphasis added). Salwa, another student at the ISP affirms that the privacy afforded by domestic space enables her to have a more intimate relationship with God. Women are not traditionally required to attend the mosque, whereas for men it is an obligation. As such, the home attains greater religious significance for women. Her reflection on what drives people to pray, guided her homeward bound. She wrote:

For me praying is in my house, in my own room, and solitude gives me this significant feeling that I'm not seen, not heard and not judged by any being but my God. Allah can understand the deepest secrets without having me prove anything. How comforting it feels those few moments away from the world of appearances and judgments (ISP 2011:43)

For Salwa, patriarchal interpretations of religion serve to represent hierarchies of power in which judgments are passed on her commitment to faith based on her not marking her Islamic identity through acts such as the wearing of the hijab. As she points out, God is cognizant of her innermost thoughts and emotions without her having to prove anything. It is a reminder that patriarchal authority is infused with everyday practices such that space is inscribed with gendered relations. Chidester and Linenthal (1995:17) remind us that sacred spaces include within them "hierarchical power relations of domination and subordination, inclusion and exclusion, appropriation and dispossession [...] sacred space anchors more than merely myth and emotion. It anchors relations of meaning and power that are at stake in the formation of a larger social reality."

In Salwa's testimony we can note the use of the personal pronoun "my house", "my room" and "my God" which alerts us immediately to a non-institutionalised conception of religion; this is a very personal relationship between Salwa and God. However, by placing herself in a very private space Salwa highlights a dual movement. She seeks to strip bare her chosen sacred space of hierarchical power relations: yet, in doing so, the practices of mosque

attendance are also re-affirmed, perpetuating gendered relations in which the visibility of women in institutionally sanctioned sacred space is minimised.

The contention that the home as a family specific space was brought into being through the process of a) industrialisation and b) the emergence of specialist agencies superseding the role of family, cannot be readily applied to the Arab and wider Muslim world. Firstly, it ought to be noted that a discourse binding family to home has long permeated Islamic traditions and can be found in both the Qur'an and *aḥadīth* literature (Campo 1991). Secondly, to say that social responsibilities have atomized around the emergence of specialist state agencies, is not completely true. Writing nearly thirty years ago (when both Ba'thist regimes in Iraq and Syria were beginning to re-assess their commitments to welfare provision for their respective populations) Halim Barakat, like Hareven, called attention to the fact that it was the family rather than the state that shouldered the responsibility of welfare provision: In the Middle East “the family undertook such diverse tasks and responsibilities as education, socialization, training, defense, welfare, securing jobs, and religious upbringing” (Barakat 1985:28). The point worth remembering here is that the targeting of the state in Iraq (Marfleet 2007a) and the opening up of Syria's private sector to neo-liberal technologies and practices (Haddad 2009, Perthes 2004) has meant that the family home today is no longer solely a bastion of privacy but once again lies at the very heart of social relations.

A welcome intervention on the discourse of home has been made by Helen Taylor (2009). Writing on the meaning of home for Cypriot refugees in London, Taylor takes up Massey's challenge to stop thinking of place as bounded and start thinking of it as centrifugal. In her four-fold analysis of home, Taylor does exactly this. As well as having a spatial, material and temporal aspect, “home” she observes “is often, in meaningful ways, defined by other people” (2009:216); more precisely, the relational home consists of “social networks, as well as the habitual social practices that make us feel at home and the accumulated resources that arise from social networking” (ibid:215). The primary relations that centre on home are those of the family.

Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori (1995: xii-xiii), writing in the foreword to Diane Singerman's (1995) subtle analysis of kin networks in the popular *sha'bi* urban quarters of Cairo, note that for Singerman it is the family which "emerges as the *repository of social -and Muslim- values* in Egyptian society. Much political action that unfolds is connected with the priority to defend the family as a kind of Islamic microcosm and to advance its welfare" (emphasis added). Elsewhere, the anthropologist Elizabeth Fernea (1985:25) has suggested that "[i]f the Koran (sic.) is the soul of Islam, then perhaps the institution of the Muslim family might be described as its body." As such, I consider religion – and in particular the relational aspects of religion or what may be termed as domestic religion - to be a hitherto under-researched factor in the lives of Iraqi refugees living in Damascus. Its salience has also passed largely unrecognised in relation to studies on kin networks (Boyd 1989, Massey et al. 1993, Faist 2000, Evans 2007).

Colleen McDannell (1995), writing on the home schooling practices of Christians in contemporary America, observes that the demands of modern life particularly through work render the home an isolated and de-sacralized space. The increasing trend by Christians in America today to home-school can be seen as a strategy to re-embed the sacred into the profane. Home rather than church becomes the defining religious space. In short, the task is to create an integrated home which produces what McDannell (1995:207) terms a "domestic Christianity". This, she tells us, "does not separate the sacred from the profane, the extraordinary from the ordinary, the pious from the trivial. From the perspective of the domestic Christianity, there is nothing about religion that need be separated from the everyday life of the family" (1995:208).

There is much scope to contrast and compare McDannell's notion of "domestic Christianity" with the central importance of the home in Islamic traditions. Firstly, as we saw with Bassam earlier in the chapter, many Iraqis are faced with the prospect of temporary or little work. The domestic home is not an isolated or empty space for much of the day. Secondly, the sacred is not re-embedded into the profane. The domestic home, in the Islamic tradition, has always been sacred. Domestic metaphors are frequently employed in the Qur'an to describe

the after-life (Campo 1991:24-26). Rules governing the etiquette of hospitality and privacy rights become “part of a universal pattern of order and salvation” (ibid: 27). According to a *ḥadīth* narrated by Ibn 'Umar, the Prophet declared, “Perform some of your prayers in your houses (*buyūt*) and do not make them graves”<sup>186</sup> Elsewhere, Jabir reported Allah's Messenger as saying: “When any one of you observes prayer in the mosque he should reserve a part of his prayer for his house, for Allah would make the prayer as a means of betterment in his house”.<sup>187</sup>

A well known Arabic proverb reminds us that *kull bayt lu ḥurmithu* or every house has its own *ḥurma* (sanctity or sacredness). The word *ḥurma* shares the same etymology of the Arabic nouns for wife, and sanctuary as well as the adjective for sacred and inviolable. Juan Campo (1991:99) observes:

*Ḥurma* is a term that can signify the sacred quality of mosque space, from local prayer places to the precincts of the holiest sites in Mecca and Medina. Sacrality thus provides a tacit linkage between the human household, God's house(s), and the Prophet's house-mosque. When sentiments that people associate with their own dwellings are connected with such localities, these sentiments are both affirmed and objectified in terms of translocal Islamic discourse.

In the homes of many of the Iraqi refugees I visited I noted that cramped living conditions resulted in curtains being put up to screen the female members of the household from male visitors. My own religious habitus served me well in such situations. I would know for instance, that a male member would accompany me to the washbasin as I washed my hands after a meal rather than just point the direction to the washbasin. On another occasion, while visiting Abu Yaseen's cousins for a late breakfast of *pācha*,<sup>188</sup> I would remember to stay waiting a few moments in the stairwell to the apartment, as to give time for the women of the household time to put on the hijab or to retire to another room. At prayer time, some of my interlocutors would stop midway

<sup>186</sup> Saḥīḥ Muslim Book 004, Number 1703

<sup>187</sup> Saḥīḥ Muslim Book 004, Number 1705

<sup>188</sup> Slowly boiled sheep's head served with bread soaked in the broth.

through an interview to reach for a prayer mat and find a space in the corner of the room. In conservative Iraqi Sunni households in particular there would be no portraits or photographs of family members on view. In their place are framed works of calligraphy which are often selected verses from the Qur'an. This can be attributed to the idea that pictorial representations of the human form are said to keep angels away from the home as well as seeking protection and refuge in the words of God. In short, the home becomes mosque.

While visiting the homes of participants, I often noted that the television would invariably maintain a background hum as I listened to my participants talk about their experiences. Other family members would be skipping through the tens of channels available. Here, Hollywood sits side by side pictures beamed live from Najaf or Makkah. Charismatic clerics – some garbed in traditional attire, others who would not look out of place on any rush hour commute in any post-industrial city – give advice on the minutiae of religious practice. Younger members of the household manage to find their way back to channels devoted to Japanese cartoons dubbed in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The use of MSA rather than a local dialect for cartoons aimed at children is interesting in of itself as it maintains a closer link with Qur'anic Arabic.<sup>189</sup> Thus, we can suggest that there is a strongly domestic character to the understanding of Islam among Iraqi refugees.

However, home is not strictly confined to the domestic, it is also relational. Another frequently heard aphorism in Damascus reminds us of this relational aspect: people are advised to choose the neighbour before the house and the friend before the road (taken): *al jār qabl al-dār wa al-rafiq qabl al-tarīq*. Having explored how the domestic dwellings of Iraqi refugees are maintained as sacred spaces, in the following pages, I consider the importance of neighbourly ties and to what extent Damascus can be considered an extension of home for Iraqi refugees. I also examine how refugees locate “home-like spaces” within the city.

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<sup>189</sup> This is not to suggest that to maintain such a link is the objective of the media outlets which produce such cartoons.

#### 6.4. Damascus as home

“Cities” as the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1996:13) reminds us “are good to think with [...they are] places with especially intricate internal goings-on” simultaneously “reach[ing] out widely into the world, and toward one another.” Damascus is one such place; it has been reaching out and drawing towards it for millennia, occupying an important interstitial space in the region. Damascus and Syria generally are where ideas, people, symbols, language, music, food and goods criss-cross from across the Middle East. In short, Iraqi refugees on arrival to Damascus already possess an *understanding* of the city; it is a shared cognitive space.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman proposes that cognition plays a fundamental role in the production of social space. He observes “knowledge picks up from the point of breach, disruption, *mis*-understanding. One may say that once this happens, objects become visible (that is I am aware of seeing them, I see them as definite objects) - since there is now a distance between me and them” (Bauman 1993:148). For Bauman then, social space is constructed through a knowledge of propinquity. The knowledge of the other is charted along a continuum at which one end can be found anonymity, and at the other intimacy. Strangers are therefore those of whom we have little knowledge. As such, any interaction or engagement with them is seemingly fleeting and perfunctory. For some of the male participants with whom I spoke limited interaction with their Syrian neighbours was a recurring theme. Mohammad, who lives in an affluent suburb of Damascus where many of the residents have ties to the military officer class, told me:

Mohammad: Relations are good but they're superficial. There's no real depth to the relations I have with them. We don't go to one another's homes. They don't come to us and we don't go to them. There's no such thing. The prospects of this happening are slim. There's one neighbour the one that lives directly opposite us that has visited. His wife has been to visit my wife on numerous occasions over the four years we've been in this building, but the rest of the building – what can I say? We greet one another when we meet on the stairs or outside but that's the limit of it.

Mohammed raises important gendered dimensions to uses of domestic spaces in Damascus. Rather than speak of having Syrian neighbours visiting him, he

speaks of a friendship between his wife and a female Syrian neighbour who calls on her from time to time. Similarly, Mu'tasim spoke of "doorstep conversations" he had with male neighbours who arrived unannounced at his home. In his treatment of religious significance attached to Muslim homes of the urban poor in Cairo, Juan Eduardo Campo (1991:21) argues that specific rules are laid out, in both the Qur'an and the *aḥādīth* literature,<sup>190</sup> governing everyday social practices such that mundane, quotidian interactions including the etiquettes of visiting one another's homes, spatial practices that relate to privacy, greetings and the sharing of food are linked directly with notions of God, what is permissible and forbidden, purity and blessing. The salience of these verses should not be overlooked when considering the gendered spatial practices of Muslims as the verses in the Qur'an are preceded and followed by a discourse on both adultery and virtue. Campo (ibid.) observes that "the very presence of these rules in the Qur'an, together in one place, lends itself to the creation of a perduring linkage between the house, the human – especially female – body, and sexual relations. Following the rules entails purity, goodness and blessing in the eyes of God." Earlier in the chapter we saw the importance of a religious habitus in navigating the role of an invited male guest in someone's family home. The point here is to demonstrate that the dealings male Iraqi forced migrants have with their Syrian neighbours are limited. I will now consider whether this is also the case beyond the confines of domestic space.

## 6.5. "Knowing how to go on"

Bauman suggests that such fleeting interactions with the stranger induce a battery of ambivalent sentiments within us born out of gaps in our knowledge. For this he coins the term *proteophobia* or "the dislike of situations in which one feels lost, confused, disempowered [...] we *do not know* how to go on in certain situations because the rules of conduct which define for us the meaning of '*knowing* how to go on' do not cover them" (1993:164). However, the rules of conduct or in Bourdeuvian terms "habitus" means that the inverse is true; there *is* a coherency for "knowing how to go on". Iraqi refugees have a habitus informed

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<sup>190</sup> See The Noble Qur'an 24:27-29 and 24:61.

by religion which is familiar in Syria. The cultural resources that Iraqi refugees bring with them include an embodied religious habitus. This provides them with conformity of practice that allows them to navigate new surroundings so that they do *not* feel lost, confused or disempowered. In areas such as Jaramana, Masaken Barzeh or Sayyida Zayneb where there is a high concentration of Iraqis, Damascus is transformed into a yet more familiar space. Simon told me:

Simon: when you look at relations between the people here, you never feel that you are in a foreign country. You have the same traditions and the same customs- it's not like going to another country. It's not like going to Russia for instance or China and you can visibly see that there are a lot of differences in the traditions. Here, we have the same traditions and customs. So you never feel that you are a stranger here [...] The thing that I like about Jaramana is that there are a lot of Iraqis here. You have Iraqi restaurants and food here. There are people here, who I hadn't seen in over forty years, people I used to be at school with. There's security so you can go out and there is a sociability here that we haven't had in Iraq in recent years. When you go out, everyone is speaking Arabic. You go to the church and you find the service is in 'Ashuri. Families we know come and visit us and we go and visit them. The visiting of one another's homes is something that happens here. So you don't get the feeling of being away from home.

Tahir: With regards your neighbours, are they all Iraqis?

Simon: There are Syrians too.

Tahir: How would you describe relations with them?

Simon: Really good. We all get on well with one another. They tell me if you need anything let us know. They helped me get a land line for the telephone and even if I want to use a car, they arrange a car for my family. They invite us to their villages where they are originally from.

Simon's remark: "the visiting of one another's homes is something that happens here" is a telling one. It confirms that the family is as much the predominant social unit in Syria as it is in Iraq. The rules pertaining to interactions between families and neighbours are much as they are in Iraq. It draws attention once more to the idea that homes are more than merely a habitat. Habitats are transformed into homes through their connectedness with other families in other habitats; homes are relational spaces. The presence of other families, recognizable faces from Iraq means that the *dhilla* or what the refugee studies literature may term "social disarticulation" (Cernea 1996) which Arab literary tradition has often associated with being forced to leave one's home is less visible. In neighbourhoods such as Jaramana, Baghdad neighbourhoods are



reproduced; people like Simon are not invisible faces lost in thronging crowds but are recognized and welcomed.

Al-Sham refers not only to Damascus, the site of my field research, but is also the historic name for the wider region that comprises modern day Syria, Lebanon, historic Palestine and Jordan. In Syria, one can find a religious and ethnic plurality which has made it possible for groups such as Armenians, Palestinians, Druze, Circassians and Kurds to establish and maintain cohesive identities while simultaneously being part of the Syrian Arab Republic. For Chatty (2010), this “local cosmopolitanism” is the lingering trace of several hundred years of Ottoman suzerainty over the region. She writes:

Al-Sham is a complex association with the imagined past of the Ottoman empire, of belonging to a millet rather than a piece of land...It is a re-affirmation of the commonality of cultural differences in this region, where cultures, languages and religion are not rooted in particular spaces but are carried in kinship and social networks (Chatty 2010:295).

I am not suggesting a rose-tinted reading of Ottoman history and the millet system they employed to govern their territories but rather any understanding of displacement within this region has to take into account the fluidity of movement of people, commodities and ideas prior to the existence of the nation-state. Indeed, the pan-Arab Ba'thist ideology that gripped much of this region during the latter half of the last century (and remains the cornerstone of the constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic) is testament to the recognition of the kinship ties and social networks that traverse the boundaries of the nation-state. This was underscored by the readiness of the Syrian Ba'thist regime to host polling stations for the Iraqi parliamentary elections. By coincidence my arrival in Damascus coincided with the final round of the Iraqi parliamentary election. In areas where there is a significant presence of Iraqis such as Jaramana, Sayyida Zayneb and Massaken Barzeh, election posters of Iraqi candidates festooned both narrow streets and main thoroughfares. On the final day of polling, I sat sipping tea from a street vendor watching Iraqis queue at entrances to polling stations manned by Syrian armed forces personnel. A

uniformed guard searched would-be voters as they approached the entrance. Outside the polling station, street vendors sell Iraqi flags. Further down the street, mini-buses with posters of candidates pasted on to the passenger windows are parked up waiting to take voters back to outlying neighbourhoods.<sup>191</sup> Inside, the walls of the polling station are draped with more Iraqi flags interspersed with portraits of Bashar al-Assad and his deceased father, Hafez al-Assad.<sup>192</sup>

Thus, when we speak of displacement and forced migration, whether it is as a consequence of the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire or from Iraq to Syria, it is more instructive to conceptualize the receiving countries as familiar spaces where one can belong rather than a space of isolation and alienation (Chatelard 2011).

#### **6.6. No home is an island**

Moving from being “out of place” or displaced to re-orienting oneself and becoming “in place” is a gradual, accumulative process whereby place is slowly inscribed with meaning through daily practices over time. Everyday knowledge of activities and practices such as the building and maintenance of houses, the tending of gardens, the picking of fruit, shopping in familiar markets, neighbourly visits, celebration of holidays, births, weddings and burials in aggregate comprise what Laura Hammond (2004) in her ethnographic account of refugee repatriation to Ethiopia refers to as “emplacement”. For recently arrived Iraqi refugees such as Simon, settling into visibly Iraqi neighbourhoods such as Jaramana – where he sees familiar faces from his past – makes the process of emplacement much more straightforward. Other Iraqis arrive in Syria and locate themselves in areas where there are few Iraqis. Aref’s family had arrived in the city of Hama, situated around 200km north of Damascus, in August 2006. After having been in the UAE with relatives, Aref followed his family to Hama in January 2007. He told me:

Aref: Hama is, even until today, close to the Arab and Islamic culture. People follow Islam there. I felt like it [Hama] was my place, my country.

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<sup>191</sup>

Author's observations in Sayyida Zayneb, 7 March 2010.

<sup>192</sup>

Author's conversation with another Damascus based researcher 8 March 2010.

Sometimes, even when you take a break and think this is not my country, I miss my country, but people there try to show us this is your country, this is your place. You are Muslim and we are Muslim. There's nothing to separate us. Nationality? Forget about it – so what? This area belongs to God and that area belongs to God – we all live on the same land. Yeah. Until now, I have 10 close friends who are like part of my family. They come to dinner and lunch at my home and I go to their house. They know my family. I know their families. On Fridays, we get together as families. I call them and tell them to bring their families to my home. They call me and tell me to bring my family to their homes.

Here, Aref is recalling the idea of the imagined community (Anderson 1991) of the Muslim *ummah* - a community of believers. The concept of a Muslim *ummah*, is one that transcends borders and nationalities. Fugeland and Engebrigsten (2006:1128) remind us that: “mosques may be holy places but they are so by their orientation to somewhere else, to Mekka [sic.]. The place of actual worship and prayer is theoretically irrelevant; it is the *ummah*, the Muslim imagined community that is invoked in the act of prayer”. Grillo (2004:866) suggests a “transethnicisation” of Muslims living in cosmopolitan centres in Western Europe creating “a kind of ‘supertribal’ category...an imagined coalescence of peoples of different origin and background under the heading ‘Muslim’” (ibid). Extending this analysis to Iraqi refugees living in Damascus may be problematic in that the experiences of Muslims living in London, for instance, have taken place within a context of multiculturalism in which they are posited as racialized others. Such an analysis is particular to the politics of contemporary Britain which do not necessarily apply to the context of Iraqi refugees in Syria. Grillo's “supertribal category” of Muslim stands as an identity marker- one of many in cosmopolitan London. Instead, I posit that being Muslim is more than just an identity marker it is a means of configuring and managing relations in social space.

Aref's assertion that “there is nothing to separate” him from the inhabitants of Hama supports my suggestion. It alludes to a shared habitus which is rooted in a common understanding of religious tradition and duty. Nationality, for Aref, is a state conferred identity. Religion allows him to renegotiate his position within a new environment. The state would have him recognized as non-Syrian, although still an Arab. It is God rather than the state that allows him to belong to

the land. We are reminded once again that the meta-narrative of the state can sit uncomfortably with the meta-narrative of religion. For Aref the power to legitimate is given to religion rather than to the state. Aref's position taking and that of his neighbours in Hama is done so in relation not only to one another and other material actors but also with their relationship to God in mind. This is far from the misrecognition which Bourdieu (1991:19) contends veils the material roots of a social order in order to "sanction and sanctify" the power and privileges of the dominant classes. The *ummah* manifests itself in the establishing of relationships with neighbours. Again the reciprocal visitations to one another's homes are integral to the process of creating the *ummah* as a lived practice. For Aref, the actions of his neighbours affirm that he is not out of place; they tell him "this is your place". Aref need not fear not "knowing how to go on" – to use Bauman's felicitous phrase – as he is reminded by his neighbours that he has a shared cultural capital, a shared world-view which does not make him a stranger: "You are Muslim, we are Muslim. There is nothing to separate us" his neighbours remind him.

Later in our conversation Aref returns to the theme of religion offering legitimation in a way that the state does or cannot. Belief in Islam ameliorates the anguish that comes with a life in exile. As we saw in Chapter One, in the Arab imagination the loss of social and material capabilities through being made an exile is a fate worse than poverty (Rosenthal 1997). A popular proverb in Damascus warns us of the fate that lies in store for one forced to leave his home: *mīn tarak dāru qall miqdāru* (the one who leaves his home, lessens his value). To overcome this loss, human activity is re-interpreted through the narrative of religion. Being a refugee is unstigmatized. Aref told me:

Aref: For Iraqis to leave Iraq it was hard. No one wanted to leave Iraq; they needed a safe place to go. I found my belief in Islam makes it easier for me to think about being a refugee. It's a hard thing to do, to leave your home, but I know that my Prophet did the same, and he was a refugee. If we think about it, in Islam we see that borders are not important, there are no nationalities. The differences are with language. All the land belongs to God and you can find a place to live and work wherever you go.

However, religious narratives, despite offering alternative understandings of belonging, do not magically erase the fact of displacement. A consequence of forced displacement today is the “management” of refugee populations as passive actors. The dependence on the Syrian state and humanitarian agencies for much needed material resources means that refugees are subjected to a bureaucratic labelling process which accentuates this notion of passivity (Zetter 1991). The category of *ibn al-sabīl* is similar in this regard and was something I had not considered when thinking about how religious traditions could be mobilized. Although an *ibn al-sabīl* is eligible for *zakāt*, many of the Iraqi refugees I met in Syria would not ordinarily have considered themselves as recipients of *zakāt*. To do so is to acknowledge the loss in “value” as the Syrian proverb has it. In my conversation with Abu Fu’ad, I was reminded of the social distance that existed between myself as a researcher and Abu Fu’ad, a refugee. I had never been displaced. The following extract captures the intersections between different discourses which an Iraqi refugee inhabits:

Tahir: Do you consider yourself as being an *ibn al-sabīl*?

Abu Fu’ad: [long pause] I’m [pauses] not an *ibn al-sabīl*. If I’m able to work I’m not an *‘ābir al-sabīl*.

Tahir: Why? Are you not cut off from the wealth you had?

Abu Fu’ad: I’m cut off from what I had, but international humanitarian organisations don’t provide the support for me here that I’m entitled to and they are responsible for me. This is the reason for the distress we are in [pauses] I’m not an *‘ābir al-sabīl*. I apologize for not answering fully. This is a tough question for me [wiping away a tear, he chuckles]. I’ve never felt that I was one. Despite being in a very bad situation, under very harsh circumstances, I’ve still been able to keep my head held high. It’s very difficult for me to answer this question.

Tahir: Can you say why you find it difficult?

Abu Fu’ad: There’s not one of us who has passed through what we have passed through, except being in need. We’ve always lived a life of being in need. For more than sixty years, we’ve always been dependent in a way. We were cut off from what we own in Palestine and we’ve been cut off from what we have in Iraq. Call us whatever you want to call us.

Tahir: I don’t want to give you any more names. As far as I’m concerned you’re Abu Fu’ad.

Abu Fu’ad: So, you know what I mean.

Here, Abu Fu’ad reveals to us the knotted position he occupies in social space. On the one hand, he posits that he falls outside the category of *‘ābir al-sabīl* if he has the ability to work. Yet on the other hand, we know that in Syria the right

to work outside of the informal sector is severely restricted by the state. This leaves refugees such as Abu Fu'ad dependent on international humanitarian agencies and NGOs; effectively becoming *'ābir al-sabīl*, albeit under a secular script. His switch from the first person "I" to the communal "we" demonstrates a shift towards the narrative of Palestinians in general. Although Palestinians in Iraq were never under the remit of UNRWA, an Iraqi ministerial body was responsible for administering the needs for Palestinian-Iraqi refugees. In Syria, this responsibility now lies with UNRWA. Thus, when Abu Fu'ad states that: "We've always lived a life of being in need [...] call us whatever you want to call us", he is referring to a perceived sense of loss in value which is a consequence of his interaction with the state and humanitarian agencies.

This is a theme I return to later in this chapter. First, I examine how Damascus, the site of my fieldwork, is inscribed such that those with the requisite religious capital are able to *read* the city to make it recognizable.

### **6.7. Sacralising the city**

Bauman imagines a cartographic representation of cognitive space to be analogous to an archipelago rather than a single coherent landmass as such. He writes "[f]or every resident of the modern world, social space is splattered over a vast sea of meaninglessness in the form of numerous larger and smaller blots of knowledge: oases of meaning and relevance amidst a featureless desert. Much of daily business is spent in travelling through semiotically empty spaces – moving physically from one island to another" (1993:158). Yet, how true is this? Do such "semiotically empty spaces" exist? Henri Lefebvre (1991) argues they do not. He categorically states: "social space can in no way be compared to a blank page upon which a specific message has been inscribed [...] Both natural and urban spaces are, if anything, 'over-inscribed'; everything therein resembles a rough draft, jumbled and contradictory" (Lefebvre 1991:42-43). I would agree. To paraphrase John Donne: no home is an island entire of itself. Let us pursue the example offered by Bauman on the movement to and fro the "oases of meaning" we occupy to test his claim of "semiotically empty spaces".

In Damascus, much of the movement across the city is mediated through the *servīs*. These are privately owned mini-buses seating a maximum of fourteen passengers that ply fixed routes between Damascus and its suburbs. The cost effectiveness and the rapid frequency of the *servīs*, means it is the favoured choice of transport in the city for those on low incomes. Contrary to Bauman, the *servīs* is not a space devoid of meaning. In fact, often it is a space heavily inscribed with religious meaning and practice. I am not suggesting that the *servīs* is a wholly sacred space. It quite clearly is not. Rather, I am pointing out that all space is contested. As with the passengers on the *servīs*, religious meaning bumps alongside and jostles next to other non-religious messages producing a space which is “jumbled and contradictory” (Lefebvre 1991:42).

Often, the driver of the *servīs* will have a recitation of particular chapters from the Qur'an playing either on the cassette player or from the radio. Sometimes you can hear listeners calling into a radio talk show where the popular Damascene Imam Shaykh Muhammad Ratib al-Nabulsi responds to questions and queries pertaining to religious practice. On numerous occasions I have heard *Sura al-Baqara*<sup>193</sup> being recited admonishing those listening to be mindful of their relations. Not all drivers listen to recitations of the Qur'an; some favour the doyennes of popular Arab music – Umm Kulthoum or Fairouz. Others may even prefer heavily synthesized, frenetic yet hypnotic, electro-*dabkeh* beats. However, if the call to prayer is heard as the *servīs* passes within earshot of the innumerable mosques which relay the call to prayer over loudspeakers, the driver more often than not reaches for the dial of his radio cassette player to turn the volume down. If the *servīs* stops to pick up a female passenger, and the passenger section at the rear is full, male passengers would offer up their seat in exchange for an empty seat next to the driver. It is rare to find a woman seated at the front with a driver. If seated at the front, an assorted collection of dashboard paraphernalia- stickers and small neon lights can be found plastered onto the dashboard or on the window. Sometimes these contain messages along the lines found in greeting cards. Others are love hearts or simply the word “love”. Occasionally, ambiguity is the order of the day with a message in a

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<sup>193</sup> The second chapter of the Qur'an “The Cow”

Halloween type font screaming: “No my friend!” Quite often you would find phrases such as *masha'allah*,<sup>194</sup> the *shahada* or even a small pocket-sized Qur'an resting on the dashboard. For some, even the passing of money along to the driver from the back of the *servīs* would require a certain etiquette which respects gendered boundaries. As a passenger approaches the point where they would alight, it is fairly common to hear the request for stopping the *servīs* followed by the expression of gratitude “‘a *zakātak*” which can be best translated as “may this be your *zakāt*”.

Thus, it is clearly evident that there are no un-inscribed spaces. In fact, in Damascus, the air is thick with religious significance and practices. For Iraqi refugees this is important as it affirms Damascus as being a familiar space. Often, my discussions with Iraqi refugees would turn to the vexed questions of not being able to work in Syria and re-settlement being a means of overcoming this difficulty. However, the prospect of re-settlement also brings with it an awareness of what could possibly be foregone in exchange. Mu'tasim told me:

Mu'tasim: [If] you speak to someone who is fairly comfortable [in Syria], has work and a home- he doesn't give Europe a second thought. Do you know why? He tells you that he can go to the mosque and pray at his convenience. He can hear the *adhān* (call to prayer) as a Muslim. When it's Ramadan he feels that it actually is Ramadan and the same for 'Eid. In Europe, you can't feel that it's Ramadan, 'Eid or any other occasion. Isn't this something that affects a person? A Muslim is affected by such things.

Thus, shared cultural and spatial practices, a familiar language and a common cognitive space render Syria more an intimately recognizable backyard than an unwelcoming, unknown, foreign neighbourhood. However, not all backyards are well kept. Some can be overgrown and difficult to manage, others may be cramped for space. In the following section, I consider the possibilities of local integration for Iraqi refugees in Damascus.

## 6.8. Whither integration?

The state exercises great power in organising and administering social space. In the case of Damascus, one only has to consider how movement across the

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<sup>194</sup> Literally “whatever God wills”



city is organised. As we have seen the *servīs* is a key mode of transport for much of the population, including Iraqi refugees. Despite Mukhayim al-Yarmouk, Sayyida Zayneb and Jaramana being the main hubs of commercial activity in South Damascus, there are no *servīs* routes which directly link the districts together. As we saw in the previous chapter, the humanitarian field is mapped such that specialist UN agencies, humanitarian actors and the state are the main point of contact for Iraqi refugees. The restrictions placed on mosques means that mosque spaces become increasingly peripheral to the material and social well-being of forced migrants. Food supplies are collected from a UN distribution facility in the suburb of Douma. The UNHCR offices are located in a discrete compound in Kafr Sousseh. There are separate queues for Iraqis when they go to renew their temporary residency permits at the passport and immigration offices in central Damascus. Earlier in this chapter, I described the scene at polling stations for the Iraqi parliamentary elections. Those who had registered their vote had left the polling station with their index finger marked with an indelible blue ink. On that particular day, they had been physically marked apart from other Syrians. Health concerns are dealt with primarily through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). All this creates a sense of exceptionalism around Iraqi refugees serving to keep them apart and distinct from wider Syrian society.<sup>195</sup> This is greatly exacerbated by the prohibition on work for many Iraqi refugees. It is the state that arbitrates where the local population and Iraqis can meet and where not.

Adnan had been fortunate in that his household income is bolstered through personal savings, rental income and a pension from the state. Professionally, Adnan had worked as an engineer, but his passion lay in craftsmanship. In Damascus, Adnan had found opportunity to craft wooden gift-boxes and decorative pieces inlaid with mother of pearl. The increased tourism to the old city of Damascus had meant that there was no shortage of opportunities to do business with the local arts and crafts workshops. I accompanied Adnan one day to the souq in the old town to visit one such workshop. On the way Adnan joked (or perhaps was warning me what lay in store for us that afternoon) that

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<sup>195</sup> A notable exception is in the field of primary and secondary education, where Iraqi refugee children have access to Syrian state schools.

“Syrians are good people as long as you don’t do business with them – just don’t get them on the subject of money”. Arriving at Abu Anas’ workshop, it became clear why Adnan valued this particular part of life he had carved out for himself. Abu Anas and Adnan were quickly into admiring some of the work the proprietor’s sons had been working on. The friendly banter and hospitality is as you would expect from a merchant in the old souq. Yet, the relationship extended beyond this. The conversation flowed as quickly and as smoothly as the tea. Adnan had been back to Iraq recently to check on his property and collect his pension.<sup>196</sup> Abu Anas was keen to learn how things were and what Adnan’s plans were. It was this interest in Adnan’s life; being afforded respect, rather than being treated as someone perpetually in need, which Adnan later told me was important – the sense of being a person rather than just a case number.

Writing on refugee policy in the Middle East Michael Kagan (2011) draws attention to a “responsibility shift” for the management of refugee populations from sovereign states to international bodies such as UNHCR or UNRWA. In effect the UNHCR becomes a “surrogate state” (Slaughter and Crisp 2008) filling the void left by a state unwilling or unable to meet obligations as outlined by the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Consequently, a division of labour manifests itself whereby the host government adopts a benign position of upholding negative rights regarding refugees; agreeing to observe the principle of *non-refoulement* in exchange for international humanitarian assistance organisations assuming the burden of providing direct assistance to refugee populations. Kagan (2011:13) maintains that in the case of the Middle East: “Arab governments are likely to acquiesce to the presence of refugees on their territory only as long as responsibility for their maintenance and ultimate departure from the country is visibly assigned to an international body or other third party.”

Syria has not proven to be an exception to this rule. As seen in the previous chapter, memorandums of understandings have been signed with 14

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<sup>196</sup> This is a common strategy for securing their material existence among Iraqis who often ‘return’ to Iraq on shuttle visits to collect rent on property left behind and collect state pensions and salaries which they are entitled to. See Doocy et. Al (2011) for further details.

international humanitarian assistance organisations, whose activities are coordinated by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. Through these organisations, refugees are able to access support for healthcare, education, and housing. Significantly, the right to employment has been denied to Iraqi refugees, though it is far from uncommon for refugees to find paid employment in the informal sector (Doocy et al. 2011). As one Palestinian Iraqi refugee put it “we’re like the *tartoora* (rickshaw), we’re not supposed to be here, but we’re everywhere. They turn a blind eye to us”.<sup>197</sup>

Consequently, refugee interaction with the wider society is considerably constrained and limited. Work is a key space where refugees can act as agents of social and economic change allowing for greater integration and acceptance of refugee communities to take place (al-Sharmani 2004, Grabska 2006). Where the right to employment is withheld, alternative strategies are formed; either in the informal sector or further afield. With established irregular migration routes operating through Turkey and Greece into Europe; many, predominately young male, Palestinian Iraqis have managed to circumvent borders and secure asylum for themselves in countries such as Sweden.<sup>198</sup> Thus, it is unsurprising that for many Iraqi refugees resettlement to a third country is the most preferred choice. Integration does not seem to be on the agenda of the refugees themselves. Here Aref sums up the frustration felt by many young Iraqis:

Aref: This is just a temporary life here - for a limited period, but you don’t know how long that period is. So, it’s hard to work, it’s hard to make decisions because you are still looking for opportunities to leave this place. This place doesn’t have any opportunities. I can work for one year, okay, after that - what? What is there? What will happen? I can’t study? I can’t make money. I can’t help my family. I might want to get married in ten years but I can’t [afford it]. Here, because I’m not Syrian, I can’t get work with the government. I can only work in small shops, factories or restaurants. We don’t know what the future can be like here. The government might in one moment say ‘okay, all the Iraqi people must leave Syria’. So, it’s a temporary life – it’s temporary and these are the most important years in my life, I have to take the opportunities that come. So here, we are kind of like refugees, we have a safe place to be; it’s a refuge, but also we are kind of like standing on one leg here. We

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<sup>197</sup> The Director of the Rābeta al-Falastīniyi al-’Iraq at an address to the Palestinian-Iraqi community on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, Damascus 16 November 2010

<sup>198</sup> Interviews with Palestinian Iraqi refugees, Mukhayim al-Yarmouk, December 2010.

don't know if we will stay here forever or move to another place. We don't have the opportunities here. If you do get an opportunity, it's limited. You can't really study. Okay, the UNHCR might give you training courses, but so what? What happens next? Nothing.

Equally, by consistently refusing refugees the right to work, the Syrian government ensures that the responsibility to provide welfare for refugees rests squarely on the shoulders of international organisations. In addition, refugees come to regard local integration as a dim prospect; buttressing the logic of the host state which opposes integration in favour of creating a more vulnerable refugee population that is able to induce greater financial resources from the international community to share the cost of hosting refugees (Kagan 2011). It also marks the refugees as recipients of aid that the local population is not entitled to. Where such entitlements were a point of contention between marginalised communities on the peripheries of Baghdad, it remains to be seen what impact such a policy could have in Syria.<sup>199</sup>

So where does this leave local integration? We have already noted that countries in this region ought to be conceptualized as familiar spaces. Indeed, the Arabic root *gh-r-b* is used to denote several related ideas: *ghurba* - exile or an absence from home; *tgharrab* – to emigrate, to be far from one's homeland, to assimilate to a western way of life; and *gharīb* – something that is strange, foreign or alien. For many Iraqis, Damascus (and in particular districts such as Jaramana, Mukhayim al-Yarmouk and Sayyida Zayneb) does not represent a foreign space at all. Kinship ties already exist not only with Palestinian Iraqis that had fled Iraq in the earlier phase of the crisis but with relatives that had settled in Damascus following the *nakbah* of 1948. Fatima, a forty year old Iraqi Palestinian from Mosul told me:

Fatima: Dealings with Palestinian Syrians are good. They've supported us and I don't feel like a foreigner around them. This is a Muslim Arab country, so I don't have the sense of *ghurba*. It's only that my wider

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<sup>199</sup> Discussions with service providers indicate that the Syrian government is considering a more long term relationship with some international NGOs and to broaden their remit so that the beneficiaries would include not only refugees but Syrian Nationals. In addition, the oversight of the implementation of projects would be coordinated through the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, rather than the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. This can be seen in the light of a recognition of the Iraqi refugee crisis being a protracted situation which would entail more long term-planning rather than just the provision of relief assistance.

family is far from me that I feel like that I'm away from home. There are so many similarities here and with our lives in Iraq; food, language...yes, there are some differences but it's not great. I feel like that we're all Palestinians together here.

Fatima immediately associates the largely positive interactions she has with Palestinian Syrians with not feeling foreign. Linking the two is the fact that she is in a Muslim Arab country and as such has an understanding of how social relations are conducted. However, one cannot ignore that she refers exclusively to Palestinian Syrians rather than Syrian society at large. For others forcibly displaced from Iraq, the sense of *ghurba* is more tangible. This is particularly the case for men who are expected to be breadwinners in their households. The liminal space that refugees occupy; the ambivalent position of the state towards Iraqi refugees generally, designating them as guests and the issuing of fixed term residency status of three to 12 months, adds to this sense of *ghurba*. This feeling of alienation may not initially stem from relations with the host population but rather the bureaucracy of state and “surrogate state” that marks them as “other” which in turn creates a distinction for the host population. Here Abu Yaseen recognizes the effect this has on a refugee and echoes the fears that Bassam had regarding an uncertain future:

Abu Yaseen: The state of mind that Iraqi Palestinians are living in Syria is that of someone who is not a permanent resident. I'm living here as a non-permanent resident. It's possible that they [the government] issue a decree at any moment that says ‘Goodbye, it's time for you to leave the country’. It's possible at any moment. Maybe there is no chance for re-settlement and the Syrian government has had enough and says ‘okay, time to leave’. So, we live in constant anxiety and that's why you feel that you really are a stranger away from home. And this affects [you] even at the level of the people, and not the State. People get to know that this house is not a Syrian or Palestinian Syrian house. So, social interaction isn't entirely harmonious. Some people like Iraqis; I mean I get on well with my neighbours. But, how do they deal with you? You're not an *ibn al-balad* [...] Up 'til now, I consider myself a guest, a visitor here temporarily and then leaving. I don't have any expectation of permanent residence.

The use of the expression *ibn al-balad* is telling. Literally meaning “son of the land”, the term belongs to a category of terms used to highlight autochthony and difference between those who belong and those who fall outside the community. Much like the term *ajnabi* discussed in Chapter One, the term *ibn*

*al-balad* fell into popular usage around the 19<sup>th</sup> Century at a time in which local populations were coming to terms with the challenges of first having Turco-Circassian and then European colonialists occupying the same social and geographical space (El-Messiri 1978). In contemporary usage the term refers to someone who is legitimately entitled to the resources and welfare of the state and denotes belonging. Rights and citizenship are the bedrock on which the edifice of integration rests (Ager and Strang 2008). For Abu Yaseen, it is the state that produces the anxiety; creating a sense of alienation. There is also ambivalence in the language that the state employs with respect to Iraqi refugees. At one and the same time, they are *shaqīq* (full brothers) and *ḡayuf* (guests) which points to a more temporal stay. By affirming only negative rights and deflecting the burden of welfare responsibility on to international humanitarian organisations, the Syrian government in tandem with the UNHCR and UNRWA has to date established a parallel system of welfare protection that in fact marks refugees as “others”. This lies contrary to the UNHCR's own guidelines on refugee protection in urban areas which aims to “reinforce existing fully authorized delivery systems, whether they are public, private or community based” (UNHCR 2009). Commendable though this may sound, the UNHCR in Syria falls short of this commitment, particularly with respect to community based organisations.<sup>200</sup> In the following section, I consider how through alternative support structures offered by community based organisations, Iraqi refugees in Damascus are able to formulate strategies for dealing with their time in Syria and for onward migration.

## **6.9. Homes away from home**

### **6.9a. The ISP as home**

The Iraqi Student Project (ISP) is a small volunteer run initiative which offers an interim education to Iraqi refugees whose education had been disrupted by the conflict. The aim of the project is to provide students with access to scholarships in America where they can complete their undergraduate studies. As we saw in Chapter Four, defining faith based organisations can be a thorny

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A UNHCR representative remarked to me that although the UNHCR worked with church organisations as implementing partners, there had been “something of a missed opportunity” with respect to Islamic networks and institutions. Author's interview with UNHCR representative, 26 March 2010.

task. Colleges which are or have been related to Church organisations have been quick to recognize and support the ISP. Mennonite colleges have provided tuition waivers to students. The Mennonite Central Committee is the largest single financial donor as well as several Catholic orders, although individual donations continue to be a significant source of funding for the ISP. Church groups including the Dominican Sisters, the Loretto Sisters, the Jesuits and a Lutheran college have all taken up collections to give to ISP solidarity groups that provide each individual student with a support network during the course of their studies.

Yet, the ISP does not self-identify as an FBO. One of the founders, Gabe Huck, rejects the notion that the organisation is based along faith lines. Rather, its motivations lie in a dissatisfaction and frustration with how humanitarian projects often neglect to acknowledge the culpability of a hegemonic United States in the creation of crises in the first instance. Gabe lamented:

Gabe: Churches or other charitable organizations are clean-up organizations so much of the time. The US military or sanctions break something, then depend on organizations like Catholic Relief Services to make everyone [in the US] feel okay about it. It's really wicked [...] I think we're saying that often the US FBOs anyway are used to mopping up – and the US government gives them the money to do this. Probably more money that Catholic Relief Services and the like spend comes from the US government than from individual donors. If it “builds toward something”, it is putting a better face on the United States' deeds, but certainly not toward any clarification of what is really going on.

For Gabe and his wife, Theresa, a central tenet of the ISP is to hold the US government responsible for the decimation of Iraqi infrastructure and particularly the Iraqi educational system. The project's objective of attaining scholarships for Iraqi students at American universities provides a platform for the students to articulate the injustice that has been perpetrated upon them. The investment – albeit minimal – in the education of young Iraqis can be considered reparations for American culpability.<sup>201</sup>

On a spring afternoon in Damascus, following the Friday prayer, Ali, a fellow research colleague, and I had been invited as guests to the ISP writer's

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<sup>201</sup> To date, in excess of 50 students have received full scholarships for undergraduate studies at American universities.

workshop. The classes at the ISP take place in Gabe and Theresa's home - a two bedroom flat in an unassuming residential apartment building. We take off our shoes at the entrance and are given a pair of slippers, as Theresa welcomes us to *Beit* ISP (the ISP home). Low-level bookshelves line the far wall of the living room. The students are sat in an L shape facing a whiteboard. Theresa asks them to do a “quick write” where the students record their impromptu feelings on an issue that has affected them in the past week. Gabe is quietly sat at his desk at the back of the living room, studiously going over the students' applications for university entrance.

Ali and I are invited to take our seats at the front of the class where we introduce ourselves to the students. The students range between 18 and 24 years of age. A question and answer session ensues where the students ask where I am from, what I've been doing and what brings me to Syria. Midway through recounting a much abridged and censored life history, I realize that my own adult life has been marked by a series of voluntary migrations; to Turkey, Morocco, Kashmir, Egypt and now Syria. Looking around the room, it dawns on me that the students sat in front of me had only ever travelled out of necessity. I stop a moment as one of the students asks me where this impulse to travel comes from. Another raises questions of identity and belonging; “where do you see home?” “I'm not sure” I reply. Theresa rescues me from my reverie by turning the students' attention on to Ali.

Shortly after, the students, led by Theresa gave a rendition of “Love Thyself” by the American folk musician, Woody Guthrie. Instantly, I conjure an image of a family sing-along at a camp fire. The choice of artist and song reveals much about Gabe and Theresa's politics and disposition towards religion - their understanding of faith.<sup>202</sup> The song itself encourages the listener to affirm their self-belief. Guthrie wrote much of his music to relate to the hardships and social injustices suffered by the working class in dust-bowl, depression-era America. For Guthrie, there was no contradiction in combining Marxist ideas with a

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<sup>202</sup> Both Gabe and Theresa have been longstanding committed activists on immigrant rights in the United States. They had also been involved in relief efforts to Iraq when it was heavily under sanctions between the Gulf Wars. Gabe had previously worked as a publisher for a Catholic publishing house which specialized on the rites and rituals of the Catholic Church.



reading of Christianity in which a central tenet was Jesus' championing of the poor; it was plain and simple "commonism" (Cray 2004, Briley 2007). Gabe similarly recognizes no incongruence between his faith and the call for social justice. He later told me:

Gabe: I think that gospel and church helped shape a place on which to stand in the world, as did other elements of life – movements we were a part of, individuals, writings – and a sense of needing to stand in contradiction to the political and military and economic identity of the US [...] If tomorrow – and it could happen – I became convinced that the sins of the church are just too overwhelming, I'd probably still cling to the scriptures, the gospels, the poetry as - for me anyway - the best sense I've run into about the world and I'd do what I'm doing now. But that's something I need to think about.

For the students, ISP is central to their experience of life in Syria. Six days of the week are spent at ISP. Some of the students have no family members with them in Damascus. Others share accommodation. This is far from uncharacteristic of the Iraqi refugee crisis. Families employ strategies where one or two members of the family migrate to open up further avenues of migration for other family members later. The expense of living without work or with poorly paid work means that some family members remain behind in Iraq to financially support those who have sought refuge in Syria (Chatelard 2008). The intensity of the ISP experience and the absence of family for some, means that the ISP becomes both surrogate family and home. As with all families, a loss of a family member can be a difficult experience. Jasim, the eldest student in the group, had been told by his father that he could no longer continue with his studies. Instead, he was expected to continue with the family business. Gabe broke the news to Jasim's classmates. A hush descended on the normally boisterous group. The students shifted uncomfortably in their seats; several began to cry. Jasim sat by Gabe's desk at the back of the makeshift class, his brow buried in his hands. One by one the students got up to console one another and Jasim. The episode captured the tight bonds that had developed between the students.

#### 6.9b. The Rābeta as home

In Chapter Five, we saw how the Rābeta al-Falastīniyi al-'Iraq is a site for Palestinian Iraqis to practice their faith through the nurturing of relationships; a community of self reliance which enables them to inhabit a world of their own construction, rather than one determined for them by others. Here I will shed further light on how the Rābeta helps locate Palestinian Iraqis in Damascus. Weddings, burials, neighbourly visits and celebrations all contribute towards the process of emplacement (Hammond 2004). The cramped conditions in which many Iraqis refugees live (Doocy et.al. 2011) make difficult the possibility of sanctifying domestic spaces through the enactment of wedding ceremonies (*katab al-kitāb*) or receive those who wish to express condolences at the passing of a loved one (*ta'zīya*).

Ordinarily, such practices, which serve also to sacralize the home, are now relocated in communal spaces such as the Rābeta. In addition, regular *iftār* meals are provided during the month of Ramadan, in which usually male members of the community gather at the centre to break their fast. Similarly, on the occasion of 'Eid al-Adha a gathering was organised wherein the use of the community centre was divided during the course of the day along gendered lines. Seminars and workshops are given on matters as diverse as religious education, the challenges of re-settlement to Europe and North America, neuro-linguistic programming, and sign language for those with hearing impairments, to name but a few. Tae Kwon Do classes for youth groups and football training is provided for young men. A social committee visits orphans, the elderly and the infirm. In short the organisation is deeply anchored in the lives of the community.

The wide range of its activities highlights something significant: namely, the absence of the community mosque in Syria. Despite the Damascus skyline being peppered with minarets of mosques, the activities of mosques are severely constrained by the state. Farouk, an Iraqi university lecturer who had benefited from Church support was particularly scathing of the situation:

Farouk: I don't know anything that comes from the mosque other than the call to prayer. That's all I know. I don't know about anything else. You tell

me why that is [the case...] Why do they leave it to people like Sister Therese to help and the mosques bar their door? Answer that for me.

The Director of the Rābeta, Abu al-Hassan, similarly concedes that the mosques have been shackled in the potential role they can play in society. The role the mosque ought to be playing in society is the one that Abu al-Hassan has helped re-create in the form of the Rābeta. In the absence of the community mosque, the UN and church affiliated organisations have taken its place. For Abu al-Hassan, this is a worrying development:

Abu al-Hassan: Syria doesn't allow mosques to play a role, it's restricted. It's not just Syria, other countries also; Jordan, Iraq – they all limit what the mosque can do. You can go and pray and as soon as you're finished. The doors close and that's it. There are centres for the memorizing the Qur'an, the role is limited. If the mosques played the role like the one churches do – for instance, the UN goes and puts people in churches, so there comes about a connection between the people and the churches, there starts to be some dealings between them and this is good from the church's perspective and its image as the people start to say 'you see how good the church is and how they show compassion towards us', so it's a kind of preaching. In my opinion, if the mosque was left to play its true role, then it would make it easier on society. I mean young people nowadays are faced with dangers of drug addiction, there's bad behaviour. I mean there needs to be a fairer distribution [in the humanitarian field].

Proselytization has long been a key concern of those who work in the humanitarian field (Deneulin and Bano 2009). Charges of such acts can be extremely damaging and dangerous. In the course of my fieldwork, I saw no evidence of such. The Director of the Middle East Council of Churches in Damascus told me that the churches in Syria and Iraq are indigenous to the region and “not a phenomenon of colonial activity like in India or Pakistan” adding that:

As Syrian citizens, we have a duty to support and help the government indirectly and to alleviate let's say the burden and tensions. Otherwise, we would see people on the street starving and this would affect our society. We are a part of this society and we bear our responsibility. We believe that it is not only the responsibility of humanitarian agencies but rather, the responsibility of the churches [...] the church is not just a building, it is a mission. You may not have a building but you have the faith in your heart and really reflect that faith. Maybe other religions

believe the same. The problem is we don't want to impose ourselves on the others.

However, as Abu al-Hassan pointed out, the humanitarian field is not a level playing field in Syria. The disparity in being able to “reflect your faith” is significant. Consequently, there is a concern expressed by some older Sunni Iraqi refugees in particular, that the lack of mosque involvement could serve to disenchant younger, more impressionable segments of society. This may be a projection of fears concerning the assimilation of younger family members in countries of re-settlement where the culture is deemed foreign. In lieu of a role for the mosque where it is at the heart of social relations for the community, it is unsurprising that an alternative space is created wherein relations between the community are nurtured and protected. Abu al-Hassan explained:

Abu al-Hassan: The role of the mosque is there to guide, to better help people understand what Islam is. The role of a Muslim is that of reform. According to Islamic precepts, God most High chose us to be representatives on this earth and was commanded to do good and to invent things that are useful to people not things which are harmful. Everything is for the good. That's the idea. To work alongside all men with the end result being the return to the Lord of the worlds and He will take us to account; it's not for us to bring people to account. Islam didn't come to us so that we would kill one another, No - what is it really about? *Al-mu'āmla, al-dīn huwwa al-mu'āmla* (Good treatment, religion is the good treatment of people). Good deeds are like a connection with God, between you and God. When I enter prayer, no one knows what's going through my mind. I could be standing there thinking today I went to the market... no one knows, no one but Allah, so this is between me and God. However, when it comes to how I deal with you- this is what is important, this is the true Islam; *al-dīn al-mu'āmla*. So people know Islam is about *akhlāq* (ethics) and *ḥayāt* (how you live), Islam is all about *ḥayāt*, how to deal with people, how to conduct business, how to be honest with people. This is what Islam is for the Rābeta and the work we do. So it plays a fundamental role in what we do not in terms of discriminating against people, but in terms of helping people reform themselves. We can see that there is good in this and as Muslims we understand there is well-being in Islam. We formed a charitable organisation so that we can honour the people and help them and take them along the path to well-being in accordance with our faith.

Abu al-Hassan himself is a refugee. As mentioned earlier, 77% of Palestinian Iraqis originally hail from three villages in the Haifa region of Palestine. As such, there are multiple, intersecting kin relations and ties of friendship which bind the

community together. So when Abu al-Hassan talks of Islam as how one lives and ethics, he privileges it above notions of Islam as merely identity. For Abu al-Hassan, this communal dimension of Islam is a reference on how to consolidate ties; how he relates to the people who are immediately around him, including friends and family. Abu Fu'ad concurs that the Rābeta is intimately embedded in the day to day lives of those who access its services. Protection and security is located in ties of kinship rather than with state organs or humanitarian agencies. The Rābeta is where family ties and protection merge to provide a “home-like space”. He told me:

Abu Fu'ad: Every problem that a Palestinian Iraqi is faced with on a daily basis, at the family level, not on the state level or at the level of the UNHCR or UNRWA, but at the level of the family; if there are problems that a family faces, we step in and try to resolve whatever the problem is. We are a community association; we're responsible for the people in our community. We get involved individually and try to reach a suitable conclusion. This is what we do.

## **Conclusion**

Given the widespread consensus on the complexity of social space as demonstrated in this chapter, it becomes incumbent on social scientists to question the relevance of the continual deployment of the religious and secular dichotomy. I stand with James Beckford (1999) in calling for an investigation of the construction, negotiation and reproduction of boundaries between the religious and the secular and in this chapter I have sought to shift the location of religious practice away from where it is usually perceived to be: that is in religious institutions. By positing the home as sacred, I again privilege the agency of individuals and put Iraqi refugees at the heart of my inquiry. This is simply because the domestic dwellings and “home-like spaces” are particular places which refugees are free to inscribe with religious significance as they see fit. This is particularly relevant in a state such as Syria where the regime places considerable hurdles in the path of those who wish to transpose the relationships integral to home-making to mosques.

A corollary of such intense surveillance of non-state actors including refugee organisations by the Syrian regime is that expanded notions of home are elaborated upon. This entails what I see as being at the heart of explaining

religious behaviour: religion is essentially a relational experience. In re-creating neighbourly and community ties, Iraqi refugees are making relevant their beliefs. The testimonies of Aref and Fatima illustrate how the *ummah* manifests itself as a lived experience through the nurturing of neighbourly relations. This is made possible through having a shared religious habitus or an embodied religious-cultural capital allows new arrivals to navigate the host society without fear of getting lost.

Whether this religious or relational-self operates in a space which is formally inscribed with religious meaning and significance is beside the point. What is critical is that spaces exist for such relations to be nurtured. Iraqi families have been cleft apart by the experience of displacement. Where people lived close to other family members and close friends, they now find that they live streets apart, in completely different neighbourhoods, cities or perhaps even in different countries. This is where “home-like spaces” take on even greater significance. They are not only spaces in which material resources are accessed but familiar welcoming places wherein refugees are recognised as being more than just a case number- they are friends or part of a larger family. In the examples of the Rābeta and the ISP project, we find examples of such “home-like spaces”. Religion thus acts as a cultural resource integral to the development of social networks and as a means of meeting psycho-social need at both the individual and collective levels.

Finally, the familiarity of Damascus and Syria at large means that the alienation which is often expected with the experience of forced displacement – the “social disarticulation” that comes with “not knowing how to go on” is dampened considerably. Any sense of alienation is brought about through the management of refugee lives by the state and humanitarian agencies who contrive to keep the refugees apart and distinct from the host population. In this chapter we may contrast Aref’s experiences with ordinary Syrians and his interactions with the state. Aref is made to feel no different by his neighbours who relate to him through the meta-narrative of religion which places him as one who belongs. In contrast, his engagements with the state mean that he is marked as non-Syrian.

Abu Yaseen similarly identifies state apparatus as mechanisms for denying him the status of an *ibn al balad*.

## Spiritual Journeys: Concluding Remarks

### Introduction

Taxi drivers stuck behind the wheel in a Cairene traffic jam are always looking to edge that little further ahead. They may even decide to take a circuitous route only to end up beside the same car which had been sitting in the same traffic jam ten minutes previously. When asked why, the driver's stoical reply more often than not is: *al-ḥaraka baraka* (there is blessing in movement), Movement is a recurrent theme in Islam. One only has to think of the prayer itself and how the devotee moves throughout it. First she is standing, then bowing, then prostrating and then seated. The pilgrimage to Makkah calls on adherents from around the world to make the journey - for some an arduous one, for others less so. Arriving in Makkah, the first port of call for pilgrims is the Ka'bah which they circle seven times. Then there is the *hijra* or the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from Makkah to Madina, the memory of which Muslim refugees remind themselves of to come to terms with their own displacement. The Prophet too was a forced migrant.

And then we have journeys which we undertake within ourselves; journeys which transform who we believe ourselves to be and where we are heading. Such ontological itineraries are thrust upon forced migrants in ways in which most people only think about at times of illness or death. At such times of anxiety Muslims often utter the *ḥawqala* a phrase which the Prophet commended as being one of the treasures of Paradise: *La ḥawla wala quwwata illa billah* (there is no movement/transformation or power except from Allah). The word *ḥawla* has no direct translation in English and captures the sense of both movement and transformation; it is movement with change in mind.

Writing about religion it has become evident to me that any grand claims of providing *the* answer would be wide off the mark. This is a very particular thesis. Its particularities lie in the multiple coinciding contexts in which it was written. Had this thesis been written about Iraqi refugees in a country other than Syria, I am sure it would have been reflected in the data gathered. Had it been written at a time other than when the region was undergoing massive social transformation, the narratives of my participants would have emphasised other



facets of their experiences. This thesis has explored a range of concerns, bringing together diverse strands from the fields of Refugee Studies, Middle East studies, Narrative Studies and the Sociology of Religion. The project I undertook aimed at contextualizing the individual experience of participants by foregrounding their testimonies. The picture which emerges of religion in the lives of Iraqi refugees in Damascus is one which is grounded in the lived experiences of my participants or what we may term “lived religion”. It is worth differentiating this term from institutional understandings of religion.

My focus on experiences of religion rather than religious experiences opens up ways of exploring religion through everyday ordinary interactions between people rather than limiting it to a study of rituals which provoke within the members of the in-group powerful emotional attachments. This insistent focus on “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 2001:171) by anthropologists and sociologists of religion has served to obfuscate the ways in which powerful material interests can influence how religion is understood and practised by people in their daily lives. To help overcome this difficulty, I employed a Bourdieuan framework alongside Thomas Tweed's definition of religion as crossing and dwelling. This analytical framework which I presented in Chapter One and explored further throughout the thesis argued that the formation of a religious disposition cannot be examined *sui-generis* but must take into consideration other social fields. Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field and cultural capital were pivotal for me in forging an understanding of religious belief and practice underpinned by the agency of forced migrants operating within and beyond constraints imposed upon them, primarily by the state. It allowed me to think of ways in which religion as a cultural resource can be mobilised in novel ways by Iraqi refugees in their pursuit of the project of “home-making”, often in opposition to guardians and gatekeepers of religious traditions. Bourdieu's notion of field and its attendant connotations as a site for struggle was particularly significant given the limitations under which Iraqi refugees operate, not to mention the constraints under which this project took shape.

The argument I have maintained in this thesis is that the Syrian regime, much like the Iraqi Ba'thist regime of Saddam Hussein, is characterised by successive

generations of authoritarian rule. It has a pervasive impact on the structuring of the humanitarian field. This results in a much constrained environment for religious networks and NGOs. Iraqi refugees today find themselves in a protracted refugee situation, under immense pressure with the traditional durable solutions to the plight of refugee populations seemingly out of reach. At the time of concluding my fieldwork, return to Iraq seemed highly improbable given the continued sectarian violence there. The Syrian regime has clearly indicated that local integration is off the agenda and resettlement opportunities to a third country are few and far between. This has created what I call a protection impasse for Iraqi forced migrants in Damascus. It is in this context that religion as a cultural resource emerges as a key component in enabling Iraqi refugees in Damascus to construct an inhabitable world. As such, Iraqi forced migrants are compelled to reflect upon their specific experiences of religion and to mobilize their understandings of religious traditions in novel and unexpected ways. This allows Iraqi refugees to take positions which challenge the discourse of state and international humanitarian agencies.

I highlight my findings in three sections. Here it is useful to refer to Bourdieu's understanding of the relationship between habitus, field and practice. Section One illustrates the genesis and structure of the religious disposition of my participants. Section Two demonstrates the protection impasse Iraqi refugees are faced with in Damascus. Section Three draws attention to the project of home-making in Damascus. I conclude with a discussion on further avenues of exploration in the fields of Refugee Studies, Middle East Studies and the Sociology of Religion.

### **1. Generating and structuring a religious disposition**

It became increasingly evident in the early stages of my fieldwork that any understanding of whether religious traditions and networks were being mobilised or not was contingent on my participants' previous experiences of religion. I was interested to learn the conditions under which a religious disposition or habitus was inculcated and at which points it became activated (Lahire 2003). A narrative approach to my interviews with participants allowed them to relate episodic life histories revealing the intersections at which the

religious field cuts across with other fields. A novel feature of this thesis has been the utilisation of participant testimony in what would be traditionally regarded as contextual material. I have presented my analysis in this way in order to build up a nuanced picture of religion in the lives of my participants. This serves to demonstrate the genesis and the structuring of religious dispositions of my respondents in addition to contextualising conditions under which they arrived in Syria.

A central thrust of this thesis has been how best to define religious activity. The holistic theoretical framework I employed posited that home-making is a key concern of religion. This draws attention to a “lived experience” of religion rather than one which privileges meta-narratives of religious institution and the state. Yet one cannot ignore the role of structures such as the state, religious institutions and international agencies. For a holistic approach, I mobilised a two-fold analysis.

First, I drew attention to the strengths of employing a Bourdieuan framework in relation to how personal trajectories inform the struggle to take positions by social actors in relation to larger socio-political and cultural structures. Individual accounts related life-stories in which respondents disclosed their subjectivity and affect, so that my analysis also examined the representation of personal trajectories.

Second, contrary to Bourdieu, the struggle which social actors participate in is not only for the accumulation of capital for a stake in the wider field of power. Rather, the struggle which religiously-minded bodies partake in has the project of home-making in mind. Positioning myself between Tweed and Bourdieu, I contend that a holistic approach, which considers religion at micro, meso and macro levels, better enables us to understand the religious lives of refugee populations.

From the testimonies of Sara and Aref in Chapter Three we learned that the home was as much a sacred space as any mosque or church. It is at home where *akhlāq* or ethics are taught. Sara reminds us that she was given an Islamic education and was “raised on knowing what is *ḥalal* (permissible) and

what is *ḥaram* (forbidden).” This early education set in place for Sara a particular way to act under certain circumstances, certain preferences and tastes, a certain way to perceive the world. The consequences of consecutive wars, which the Ba’thist regime under Saddam Hussein embarked on, left a heavy toll on Iraqi society. Social and economic insecurity reached their peak during the era of sanctions during the 1990s threatening the integrity and functioning of the home for millions of Iraqis leading to a crisis of legitimation for the regime. The possibilities of agency underwent dramatic change under the corrosive impact of American led sanctions. Here, we begin to see the first tentative moves towards what my respondents referred to as the *ṣaḥwa Islamiye* or Islamic awakening wherein people increasingly developed a religious orientation. We are reminded also that religion is not dis-embedded from changes in wider society. The large numbers of Egyptian migrants who were in Iraq at the time may have contributed to the trend towards Salafism. This is an issue which requires further investigation.

The Ba’thist regime responded by re-embedding tribal solidarities into the fabric of urban Iraqi life. The re-emergence of kinship networks in the political field brought with it an increasing conservatism which employed religion as an idiom. This was most evident in the regime’s mobilisation of religious resources in its *ḥamla al-īmāniyeh* or faith campaign. My findings draw attention to the way in which the faith campaign was regarded by many as being an instrumental tool in the hands of the state where religion was mobilised around identity politics. Abu Fu’ad’s testimony in Chapter Three in which he asserts that “the faith campaign had nothing to do with true religion” emphasises a struggle between people and the state over the meaning of religious traditions. People are shown to be active agents rather than mere consumers in the religious field when Abu Fu’ad claims “everyone had their own interests”. The failure of the state to wield its authority over the Iraqi people by means of the faith campaign is also testament to the struggle in the religious field. The testimonies of Haidar and Adnan in Chapter Four confirm the disparity between the lived religion of my participants and institutional understandings of religion. Key religious actors and institutions are held responsible for not bringing a cessation to the sectarian

conflict following the American invasion of Iraq. This, I argue, has resulted in a “trust deficit” between Iraqi refugees in Damascus and institutional actors opening the way for novel mobilisations of religious traditions by the former.

## **2. Protection impasse in Syria**

The volume and structure of capital with which refugees arrive in a host country often determines the possibility for onward migration (Van Hear 2006). Some of my participants were able to draw on greater material resources than other Iraqi refugees, we saw this in Chapter Five in the case of Hala and her outreach visits to materially less fortunate families. Bassam’s testimony gave the view from the other side of the fence where he believed that he did not have the requisite know-how in his dealings with international humanitarian agencies to obtain re-settlement in a third country.

In addition, material resources can be supplemented once in Syria. It is far from uncommon that some forced migrants “return” to Iraq on shuttle visits to collect payment for rents outstanding on property they own or to collect a state pension which they are due. Others are less fortunate and are wholly dependent on the so-called protection space that the UNHCR negotiates in partnership with the Syrian state on the behalf of refugees in urban settings. An important component of this strategy is the UNHCR’s relationship with local community organisations.

My findings draw attention to the complexities of the social space which Iraqi refugees inhabit. This is no more so the case than when we examine the positions refugees take in the humanitarian field. My work aims to advance understanding of the humanitarian sector and the position of refugees within it. I demonstrate that the humanitarian field in Syria is one of struggle over how religious traditions can and should be mobilised. The state seeks to assert control and stipulate how FBOs operate. This it achieves through the enactment of specific laws which curtail the activity of Muslim organisations. It also effectively inhibits any possibility of mosques being a site of inclusion and opportunity for Iraqi refugees. On the other hand, the state allows church-based organisations to meet the welfare needs of Iraqi refugees. A consequence of

this is that international humanitarian agencies scarcely engage in any meaningful collaboration with Islamic networks. Instead, church-based organisations are seen as preferential partners given their transnational networks.

In spite of the considerable advances made by the UNHCR in its attempts to carve out a protection space for Iraqi refugees in Syria, many of my participants expressed frustration and disillusionment with the work the agency was doing. The fact remains that local integration seems a distant possibility. This is primarily due to the Syrian state's refusal to grant Iraqi refugees access to the formal labour market and only issues residency permits on a temporary basis. Thus, it is the state which accentuates the sense of *ghurba* (alienation) or the sense of being a stranger in Syria. In light of such restrictions, many of my participants were confused by the UNHCR's preoccupation with offering vocational courses in partnership with local organisations rather than arranging re-settlement to a third country. The testimony of Dina and Farouk in Chapter Five typifies the "protection impasse" in which Iraqi refugees find themselves, wherein the three traditional durable solutions to displacement issues of return, re-settlement and local integration are off the agenda.

It is in this context that refugees from Iraq position themselves between numerous international humanitarian organisations, the state and religious networks to produce a distinctive geography of exile: one in which they are under intense constraint. This, I argue, triggers alternative mechanisms of survival in the city. Networks which braid together kin, ethnic and religious ties are mobilised to help deal with the alienation of prolonged exile. The belated recognition by the UNHCR of the refugee as an urban person (Marfleet 2007b, UNHCR 2009) has meant that much of the literature in the field of refugee studies had been concentrated on rural encampments. As ever greater number of refugees are to be found arriving from and spontaneously settling in urban settings, it is surprising that the socio-cultural lives of urban refugees has not been examined more intensively. My project aims to contribute to the literature in the field of refugee studies in this regard.

### **3. Dwelling in Damascus**

A central concern of this thesis has been to understand the significance of religious traditions in the initiatives and strategies employed by forced migrants in their everyday lives. To do so, I was led to situate religion in the lives of my participants and consider the ways in which religious practice was produced spatially. In particular, I asked about spaces in which religion facilitates inclusion for Iraqi refugees in Damascus. As I have maintained throughout this thesis, the capacity of religious institutions such as the mosque – traditionally considered a site of inclusion or refuge – to provide material support to refugee populations is limited. This can be attributed to both the constraints placed by the state on religious organisations in Syria and the lack of a “common script”, to use Deneulin and Bano's (2009) phrase, from which both secular international humanitarian organisations and local FBOs can read. In light of such constraints I was required to look to spaces closer to the familial home to locate religion in the lives of my participants.

Tweed's (2006) definition of religion as being concerned with making homes and crossing boundaries lends itself to intersections between refugee and migration studies and the sociology of religion. In Chapter Six, I elaborated on the meaning of home, contributing to debates which have already identified attempts by displaced populations to re-create home as a central concern in their lives (Hammond 2004, Taylor 2009). In these earlier studies the contribution of religion to the project of home-making has been configured broadly, often with a heavy institutional emphasis. My contribution in this regard lies in a focus on relational and inter-subjective meanings of home which are closely associated with religious traditions and ideals.

Islamic traditions affirm the centrality of the “relational home” (Taylor 2009:215) in religious practice and imagination. The sacrality of home is translocative: it is not fixed in bricks and mortar alone but in relationships. It is a reminder that the Durkheimian sacred-profane binary is far too mechanical and fails to capture the life experiences of social agents. The testimony of Abu al-Hassan in Chapters Five and Six draws our attention to the notion that religion is fundamentally concerned with the nurturing of relationships. The interactions

individuals and groups have with one another on a day to day basis is what constitutes everyday lived religion. It is the attention and care given to what I term the “relational self” that lies at the heart of religious practice and teachings.

This emphasis on the “relational self” enables broader understandings of home. Home becomes migratory: it can move beyond the confines of the domestic, familial home. The centrifugal capacities of the relational self are reflected in what I call “home-like spaces”. The ISP and the Rābeta are both examples of such spaces in which the potential to facilitate and maintain relationships with the wider community are maintained. With the insistence of both organisations not to self-identify as FBOs, we are reminded once again of the constraints and opportunities at intersections of religious and humanitarian fields in which refugees are positioned. Furthermore, the experience of sectarianism has left Iraqi refugees wary of organisations which explicitly mobilise on the basis of faith.

Salim's testimony in Chapter Six captures the centrifugal capacities of the relational home. He points to the coming together of the neighbourhood at Friday prayers which provides “shelter and unity” to those attending. The Friday prayer for Salim symbolises “a migration to peace”. Associating the mosque with images of home, as a refuge and the act of prayer as migration, Salim, at the moment of prayer, recalls his own migration and experience of becoming a refugee.

A significant proportion of refugees worldwide originate from countries where Islam is an important element of the socio-cultural tradition. This is not to say that Islam produces refugee populations but is indicative of where current crises of mass displacement are located. The volume and structure of resources that forced migrants have at their disposal determines how far they get (Van Hear 2006). Those with an inadequate composition of capital invariably remain within the borders of their own country. Those with a little more often find themselves in a neighbouring country which shares a socio-cultural tradition rooted in Islam. In light of this, conceptualising religion along spatial lines, I believe, provides researchers interested in both the sociology of religion and the study of forced migration with considerable opportunity to explore decision-making and



strategies of displaced populations. In particular, Thomas Tweed's (2006) notion of religion as crossing and dwelling in addition to Zygmunt Bauman's (1993) idea of cognitive space are particularly useful in helping to understand the struggles of forced migrants to orient themselves following displacement.

In addition to domestic dwellings and home-like community spaces, the city of Damascus constitutes a key space inscribed with religious significance which allows Iraqi refugees to orient themselves following their displacement. As with domestic dwellings and home-like spaces, the city is a space which both reminds and facilitates Iraqi forced migrants of the significance of nurturing the "relational self". It has already been argued that Damascus is a familiar space for Iraqi refugees (Chatty 2010, Chatelard 2011). My contribution to the literature aims to develop this argument. I have demonstrated how an understanding of religion as a relational practice is deeply embedded in the society and culture of Iraq and Syria. Religion configured as *akhlaq* (ethics) and as *al-mu'āmalā* (the good treatment of others) has meant that the stranger in the Arab or Muslim world was never traditionally seen as a hostile threat. This has resulted in a "local cosmopolitanism" (Zubaida 1999, Chatty 2010). For Iraqi refugees arriving in Damascus this means they arrive equipped with sufficient cultural capital and in some cases social capital to help navigate new surroundings. Embodied cultural capital in the form of religious habitus and the partial reconstruction of social networks from neighbourhoods in Baghdad challenges any notion that Iraqi refugees in Damascus may have lost their functionality or are socially disarticulated (Cernea 1996). In most cases Damascus is a shared cognitive space (Bauman 1993).

#### **4. Further research**

Thinking ahead to further possibilities generated by my research, I identify a number of areas that can be examined to broaden our understanding of the relationship between religion and forced migration. Here, some features of the theoretical framework I employed in this thesis may be relevant in other locations and at other times.

Systematic study of any social phenomenon throws up as many new questions as it answers. While I have attempted to locate religion in the lives of Iraqi

refugees in Damascus, I always kept in mind my own location in the project. This is reflected in the structure of this thesis wherein I mapped the religious/humanitarian field in Damascus by direct engagement with Iraqi refugees and refugee service providers. My experiences in the field gave me a particular perspective on how the religious and humanitarian fields were structured. In contrast, the Iraqi religious/humanitarian field was mapped by drawing on the memories of Iraqi refugees. While this in no way detracts from the value of the exercise there is the problematic of memory to contend with. My participants' memories are not concrete facts concerning the past in Iraq. Their memories are intimately linked with the current situation they are in.

The memory of sectarian violence lingers strongly and was evident in the testimonies my participants gave. The formation of a new state in Iraq after 2003 prompted the displacement of significant numbers of Iraqis, particularly from minority groups, who were deemed by the emergent powers within Iraq to be surplus to requirements. The fact that actors within the religious field have been the ones to make gains within the field of power has meant that institutional forms of religion – particularly from the Shi'i sect - have become increasingly significant in the Iraqi sacred landscape. While many Iraqis did seek refuge in neighbouring countries, a greater number were displaced internally. Testimony from my participants indicates that religious institutions, networks and actors have been active in meeting the welfare needs of those internally displaced within the borders of Iraq along sectarian lines. The entwining of religious authorities with political power in Iraq indicates that the religious field in Iraq has undergone momentous change. Questions arise concerning the structuring of the religious field in Iraq and how this has impacted on the religious habitus of those who remained behind. In the field of forced migration studies we can ask how this has influenced the initiatives and strategies of internally displaced people in Iraq.

Another point worthy of consideration is the issue of non-Arab refugee populations in Syria. Although the vast majority of refugees in Syria are either Palestinian or Iraqi, there are pockets of refugee populations from non-Arabic speaking countries such as Somalia and Afghanistan resident in Damascus.

Here there is further opportunity to investigate the significance of religion in the lives of forced migrants. Not being Arab excludes such populations from the few privileges the Ba'thist regime has until recently extended to other Arabs. Developments currently under way in Syria may have lasting repercussions in this regard. As I asked of Iraqi refugees, we can similarly question the extent to which Damascus is a cognitive space for non-Arabs. Are they considered foreign in Damascus or are Islamic understandings of the stranger and ideals of the *ummah* still relevant?

Comparisons can be drawn between UNHCR treatment of non-Arab refugee populations with those of displaced Arab populations. During the closing stages of my fieldwork, I was alerted to a small population of Afghan refugees in Damascus. As is the case with many Iraqi refugees, Syria is not deemed a final destination for Afghan refugees but a staging post en route to locations where they have greater social resources. During a short visit to Damascus in August 2011, I witnessed a protest outside the offices of the UNHCR head offices where a group of around 60 Afghan refugees had set up camp. Some of those gathered had sewn their mouths closed to protest against the difficult conditions in which they were living in and the lack of movement on their claims for resettlement. The stifling summer heat and the fact that the protest was taking place at a time when the Syrian security services were paying close attention to all public gatherings (directed against the regime or not), surprised me. As the time for prayer approached, many stood to form rows facing south; the direction of *al-ḥaram al-sharīf* or the Noble Sanctuary (the name given to the Ka'bah and its environs) in Makkah. It seemed to me both an appeal to God and the *ummah* for assistance.

There is also scope to contrast my findings with the experiences of Arab Iraqi refugees who have settled in neighbouring non-Arab countries. Although Islam remains an integral component of the socio-cultural tradition of countries such as Turkey or the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq, the religious field in relation to the field of power of both is differently structured. We can test for the degree of alienation and the difficulty of the home-making project which refugees undertake in those settings. Such a study might provide greater clarity

as to the extent to which language rather than religion is of greater significance in making forced migrants' places in the world.

An additional avenue for research is the significance of religion in countries where refugees do not have a shared cognitive space with host citizens. In the case of Iraqi refugees, researchers could explore circumstances in countries which they have re-settled, where Islam is not a cornerstone of the socio-cultural tradition and where Arabic is not spoken. Here refugees enter territory which they might recognise as *gharīb* or strange and foreign. Even here, they would come up against “sacralized” identities such as mine. What implications does this have for refugees and their mobilisation of religious resources in order to re-make home?

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## **Appendix One: Interview schedule for refugee participants**

### **Migration History**

1. Where in Iraq are you from exactly?
2. Tell me about your childhood.
  - What was religious education like at school?
  - Did you learn about religion at home?
2. Can you tell me what your life was like in Iraq before 2003?
3. Can you describe what life was like in Iraq after 2003?
4. How did you/your family cope with the deteriorating situation?
  - Were there any networks of support in your local community?
5. Can you tell me why you/your family left Iraq?
6. Why did you choose to come to Syria (and not another country)?
7. Did you get any advice from people in the mosque/ church/ temple in Iraq about what to do in Syria?
8. Did anyone in Iraq tell you who/what to contact in Syria?
  - Did you have an address to go to, or a phone number?
  - Who provided this... anyone in the mosque/ church?
9. Can you tell me about the time you first arrived in Syria?

### **Networks of Support in Syria**

10. When you first arrived in Syria to live, did you get any advice or help from anyone in the local community who is not from your family, to help you settle?
  - a) If yes, who? How did they help you?
  - b) If no, how did it affect you that you did not receive any help from the local community?
11. Can you tell me a little bit about some of the times in the last 6 months you needed help or information of any kind, from anyone outside your own family/household?
  - What did you need help with?
  - How did you find help?
  - Who helped and who didn't?
  - Why do you think they helped or refused to help?

### **Where you live and work**

12. Why did you choose to live in the area you are currently living in?
13. What do you like about the neighbourhood that you live in?
  - Why?
14. What don't you like about the neighbourhood that you live in?
  - Why?
15. How would you describe your relationship with your neighbours?
16. Do you work?
  - If yes, how did you find (get) your current main job (or most recent job for those not working at present)?
  - Do you like working there?

### **Religion**

16. Do you feel like a stranger in Syria?
  - If yes, how and why?
  - If no, tell me more.
17. How do you see yourself today - as a "guest"/ "visitor" / migrant in Syria?
18. Does being Muslim/ Christian/ Mandaean in Syria help you deal with being a (forced) migrant?
19. Does your faith help you cope with your situation?
  - If yes, how?
20. For you, is being Muslim/ Christian/ Mandaean in Syria any different from being Muslim/ Christian/ Mandaean in Iraq?
  - Have your beliefs and practices changed in any way at all since coming to Syria?
  - Have you learned more about your faith as a result of the move from Iraq? If yes, what?
21. Is the mosque/church an important space for you?
  - If yes, how and why?
  - If no, why not?
22. What kind of support does your mosque/ church / temple provide you?
23. How would you describe your relationship with your mosque/ church/ temple?

24. Do you think Islam /Christianity/ Mandaeanism has anything to say about forced migrants?

- If yes, what?

25. Why do you think the people at your mosque/church assist displaced people?

## **Appendix Two: Interview schedule for refugee service providers**

1. Can you tell me about your organisation?
2. Can you tell me what your organisation does?
3. How long has your organisation been active here in Syria?
4. To what extent have previous migrations informed the way your organisation operates?
5. Does your organisation specifically help Iraqis?
6. Are there any reasons why someone may choose not to use your services?
7. Does it help all Iraqis regardless of background?
8. In which ways do you support Iraqis that visit your organisation?
9. To what extent is providing services to Iraqis a difficult task?
10. Does your organisation have sufficient resources to deal with the demands of Iraqi migrants?
11. What limits are there on your organisation's activities?
12. Why do you offer support to Iraqis?
13. Do you think religion offers forced migrants any protection? If so, what and how?
14. To what extent do you think mosques or churches meet or fail to meet the expectations of forced migrants?
15. Do you think there any differences in the way different refugee groups are treated?
16. To what extent does your faith play a role in what you do?